

# Leading violent lives

On everyday life and its organisation  
in the Lord's Resistance Army

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Anne Laube

aus

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*Für Opa.*





It wasn't ruthlessness that enabled an individual to survive – it was an intangible quality, not particular to educated or sophisticated individuals. Anyone might have it. It is perhaps best described as an overriding thirst – perhaps, too, a talent for life, and a faith in life. (Extract from the narrative of a Holocaust survivor, cited in Des Pres 1976: 191–192)



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# Contents

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<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1	Motivation . . . . .	1
1.2	Connecting the micro and meso level of violent conflict: Concepts and theories . . . . .	3
1.3	Research questions . . . . .	12
1.4	Outline . . . . .	13
<b>2</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>15</b>
2.1	<i>The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves</i> : Narrative criminology and the challenge of analysing combatants' stories . . . . .	15
2.2	Doing research with former combatants in a post-conflict setting .	21
2.3	Sampling, data collection and analysis . . . . .	37
<b>3</b>	<b>Background: Conflict's history and memories</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Analysis</b>	<b>69</b>
4.1	Getting a gun and becoming a soldier: Initiation and socialisation	69
4.2	Finding the everyday in the extraordinary: Adaptation and resilience in violent lives . . . . .	90
4.3	Engaging with organisational demands: Agency in resistance and compliance . . . . .	106
4.4	'Me, I am not a killer': Linking and decoupling identity and action	121
4.5	Wives at night, soldiers during the day: The roles and positioning of female combatants . . . . .	148
4.6	Refusing means, not ends: Politics, spirit beliefs, and legitimate authority . . . . .	166
4.7	Looking back and looking forward: Returning to civilian life . . .	178
<b>5</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>195</b>
	<b>Appendices</b>	<b>227</b>



## List of Figures

---

2.1	The economy of aid in Gulu's Senior Quarters . . . . .	25
2.2	Going to the field . . . . .	37
4.1	The LRA's headquarters in South Sudan, late 1990s to early 2000s	93
4.2	Museventh day . . . . .	166
4.3	Graffiti on a wall of the compound of the NMPDC . . . . .	167
1	Interviewees' home sub-counties in the Acholi subregion . . . . .	232
2	Interviewees' home sub-counties in the Lango subregion . . . . .	233





## List of Tables

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1	The sample's characteristics . . . . .	231
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## Glossary

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<b>adaki</b>	Low-lying hut, burrow or trench that can accommodate two to three soldiers.
<b>adwii</b>	Literally, enemy or terrorist; also used to mean rebel.
<b>alup</b>	Makeshift houses temporarily put up for people to sleep in; during the insurgency, they served as hiding places to escape abduction and violation by the LRA.
<b>boda-boda</b>	Motorcycle (or sometimes bicycle) taxis. They are one of the most common and convenient means for travelling short distances. The term is a corrupted version of border, referring to their use for crossing borders.
<b>cunna</b>	Courtship
<b>dano adana</b>	Human being or human person; a term that emphasises someone's personhood.
<b>dwog paco</b>	Return or bring back home; a term that is used to refer to returnees or former combatants of the LRA.
<b>escort</b>	Bodyguard
<b>gamente</b>	A corruption of government; <i>mony pa gamente</i> are government soldiers.
<b>intelligence</b>	A job title used for spies and other people tasked with gathering information.
<b>kurut</b>	A corruption of recruit; used by the LRA to refer to new abductees.

<b>lakwenna</b>	Messenger, envoy or apostle. Since Alice Auma, the leader of the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM), also referred to herself as Alice Lakwena, LRA fighters sometimes go by that name.
<b>luk</b>	A customary payment or fine paid by the man to the parents of a woman he illicitly slept or eloped with; usually translated as dowry or bridewealth.
<b>mato oput</b>	‘Drinking the root of <i>oput</i> ’; a ritual of reconciliation and a traditional justice mechanism often used to reintegrate former combatants into their communities.
<b>moo yaa</b>	Sheanut butter or oil; it is used to ritually anoint new combatants in the LRA.
<b>olum</b>	Literally, bush or grass; also used to refer to combatants of the LRA.
<b>panga</b>	Machete
<b>radio call</b>	Communication with high frequency (HF) radios
<b>sick bay</b>	The place where sick and wounded LRA combatants were treated.
<b>standby</b>	Fighters on standby are not assigned to a specific mission, but have to wait for orders to move and act.
<b>ting-ting</b>	<i>Tingo</i> means to lift or carry. It is the name given to young combatants (usually, but not necessarily girls) tasked with taking care of young children, carrying goods and helping with household duties.
<b>wang oo</b>	The fireplace; it has a special meaning in Acholi culture, since it is the place where stories and tales are told, often with the aim of educating young children.

# Acronyms

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<b>AFRICOM</b>	United States African Command
<b>CAR</b>	Central African Republic
<b>CoH</b>	Cessation of Hostilities
<b>DANIDA</b>	Danish International Development Agency
<b>DRC</b>	Democratic Republic of Congo
<b>FARDC</b>	Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo
<b>FRONASA</b>	Front for National Salvation
<b>GoSS</b>	Government of South Sudan
<b>GoU</b>	Government of Uganda
<b>GUSCO</b>	Gulu Support the Children Organisation
<b>HSM</b>	Holy Spirit Movement
<b>ICC</b>	International Criminal Court
<b>ICD</b>	International Crimes Division
<b>LRA</b>	Lord's Resistance Army
<b>LRM</b>	Lord's Resistance Movement
<b>NGO</b>	non-governmental organisation
<b>NMPDC</b>	National Memory and Peace Documentation Centre
<b>NRA</b>	National Resistance Army
<b>NRM</b>	National Resistance Movement

<b>NUDC</b>	Northern Uganda Data Center
<b>PRA</b>	Popular Resistance Army
<b>RLP</b>	Refugee Law Project
<b>SPLA</b>	Sudan People's Liberation Army
<b>STI</b>	sexually transmitted infection
<b>SWAY</b>	Survey of War Affected Youth
<b>UNCST</b>	Uganda National Council for Science and Technology
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>UNLA</b>	Uganda National Liberation Army
<b>UNOCHA</b>	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
<b>UPC</b>	Uganda People's Congress
<b>UPDA</b>	Uganda People's Democratic Army
<b>UPDF</b>	Uganda People's Defence Forces
<b>UPDM</b>	Uganda People's Democratic Movement
<b>UPE</b>	Universal Primary Education

## 1.1 Motivation

In the run-up to the Ugandan presidential elections in 1985, the incumbent president, Milton Obote, gave a memorable interview to the BBC. Its editor, Robin White, was set on talking about the political turmoil that preceded the elections. In the course of the interview, Obote became increasingly enraged by White's questions about the challenges posed by, as he put it, "a handful of gunmen" and Yoweri Museveni in particular (White and Obote 1985) – a line of questioning which he saw as both irrelevant and insulting. The insurgency, he said, would be over soon; "their numbers and areas are shrinking" (White and Obote 1985). As it turned out, he was wrong both about the threat that Museveni posed to his leadership and about the longevity of the armed conflict that evolved around it. For more than 30 years now, Museveni has been the president of Uganda, and the insurgency continued – or, rather, was renewed – with his coming into power. Since 1987, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has been at war with his government, operating in Uganda, (South) Sudan, Central African Republic (CAR), and Congo. While the LRA's fighting force has been severely diminished since its peak in the late 1990s and the early 2000s,<sup>1</sup> so far, all predictions that it would disappear soon have proven to be premature. As the remnant of an inactive Ugandan civil war, groups of LRA combatants still terrorise populations in Congo and CAR through the abduction, looting, and killing of civilians. Many armed groups disappear as quickly as they rise to power – because they lack effective command structures or committed fighters who stay when the going gets tough, or they stumble over internal power struggles. Against this backdrop, the persistence of the LRA is at least surprising.

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<sup>1</sup>Back then, the LRA was presumed to consist of between 2'500 and 3'000 armed combatants (see Cakaj 2017c, Lancaster et al. 2011: 28–29, Lancaster and Cakaj 2013: 55, LRA Crisis Tracker 2015: 5).

This thesis is an attempt to shed some light on the puzzle of the LRA's extraordinary resilience. Initially an armed militia that contested the takeover by Yoweri Museveni and his National Resistance Movement (NRM), it quickly turned against the civilian population it aimed to protect, and resorted to the forced recruitment of minors into its ranks. Without much popular support from the civilian populations they move in, with no access to natural resources, and relying on mainly involuntary personnel, the LRA clearly lacks the ingredients considered necessary to start an armed movement, let alone to sustain it over a prolonged period of time.

What makes the continuous presence of the LRA possible? How can an organisation that has no popular support or financial means, one that relies on forced recruitment, sustain itself for such a long time? How does it manage to create compliance and even commitment among its mainly involuntary personnel? And how do the combatants themselves cope with these demands of violent action? What resources do they have to survive, get used to, and – for some – even come to enjoy an everyday life that is structured by violence and the threat of it? How does their violent lifestyle impact the way combatants think about themselves, and vice versa? In short: How do combatants cope with the violent demands of the LRA, and how does the LRA manage to enforce its violent demands? These are the questions motivating this thesis.

Both sets of questions possess relevance beyond the case study presented here. Through them, I intend to make a point in analysing the organisational structures and the intra- and interpersonal dynamics of civil war, thus devoting more attention to the meso- and-micro level dynamics of armed conflict. Since the LRA is a more extreme example in regards to individual motivation for participation in civil war, it can be considered a suitable case to develop a theory of agency in and commitment to collective action.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>On the rationale of case selection in case study research, see Gerring (2007).



## 1.2 Connecting the micro and meso level of violent conflict: Concepts and theories

Departing from the case of the LRA, this thesis makes an argument about the interplay of organisation and institutions on one side and interpersonal action and identity on the other. In this chapter, I will detail the concepts central to my thesis, and outline the contributions that my analysis will build on. The leading questions are these: Who are the actors in armed conflict, and how do they come to act as such?

### Youth at war: Young combatants in contemporary conflicts

Most participants of war in Africa are young, as is the continent (see Honwana 2012); young combatants shape the face of conflict in Africa (see for instance Honwana 2006, Richards 2008, Shepler 2005, Utas 2003, Wessells 2006). There is a genuine nexus between being a combatant in contemporary conflicts and the category of youth, which is why I will address the two social categories together.

In what follows, I will talk about ‘young combatants’ instead of ‘child soldiers’, a term I consider both less precise and fraught with difficult implications.<sup>3</sup> For one thing, it evokes certain notions about childhood as defined and practised in modern Western societies: a period free of concerns and obligations that is defined by age instead of social place (see, for instance, Honwana 2006, Lee 2009, Shepler 2005). The term ‘child soldier’ is misleading even if it is reserved for those below the age of 18, since not all of these combatants are minors (as defined by the Geneva Convention), and not all of them are soldiers (in the sense of fighters on the battlefield). Moreover, it obscures the fact that most LRA combatants were abducted as children, but lived in the LRA and returned from the bush as adults (Oloya 2013: 20–22).

By combatants, I refer to participants in war and armed violence against state and non-state actors. As such, combatants are part – members or personnel – of both state- and non-state armed groups. They fulfil different organisational tasks – most visibly, but not necessarily, fighting. Indeed, in many armed groups,

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<sup>3</sup>I will also abstain from using the term ‘rebel’, a choice I will explain in Chapter 4.4 starting on page 121.

only a small number of combatants actively and regularly participate in fights, while they and others fulfil support and social functions most of the time. Not all combatants engage in warfare on the battlefield, but all of them are somehow involved in the business of waging war – be it by taking care of wounded fighters, spying on enemy forces, providing food and shelter for the group, handling administrative tasks, recruiting new personnel or in some other way.

Here, two questions are of particular relevance: (1) How do young people come to join armed groups? (2) How do they learn to act as members of armed groups, i.e., to routinely perpetrate violence?

The youth of combatants is relevant because, for one thing, it relates to their *motives for participation* in war and armed conflict. What drives (young) people to join violent insurgencies? In civil war research, this question has been discussed thoroughly. Among the numerous publications, the contributions of Berdal and Malone (2000) and Collier and Hoeffler (2004) on greed and grievance have become a cornerstone of reference for the debate. In short, they identify two distinct complexes of motives: Combatants fight either because they expect some kind of material gain, or they do so to address perceived injustices that relate to their collective identity (as a nation, tribe, social group, etc.). This juxtaposition has been challenged and build on over the years. Armed groups have been categorised by the goals they pursue, and the incentives for participation they offer to their members: material and non-material, individual and collective, long and short term (Gates 2011, Tarrow 2007, Weinstein 2009).

In sum, participation in today's civil wars has been discussed as a resource for individual and collective empowerment. This aspect of empowerment through waging war is not a new, but is certainly a genuine aspect of the wars of the present, and it is inextricably linked to the youth of its protagonists. For most of them, being young is an experience marked by precariousness and exclusion, of being denied access to resources of empowerment, such as jobs and land, which would allow them to build independent lives. A large portion of African youth are caught in a state of limbo between childhood and adulthood, a state which Alcinda Honwana (2008b, 2012) has described as “waithood”. While they are no longer children in need of care, they lack the necessary means to become people capable of making decisions concerning their own lives. Their age may indicate that they are adults, but they are not socially recognised as such, because their status depends on the social roles they assume rather than on their

biological age (Honwana 2008a: 144). Their collective waithood is both a source of grievances (see for instance Philipps 2013) and a resource for their mobilisation as participants in armed conflict (see for instance Richards 2008). In this situation, becoming a combatant might turn out to be an opportunity to survive, and even thrive, in an environment that provides only limited life chances both on and off the battlefield (see Vigh 2006, Vlassenroot and van Acker 2001). For many, fighting becomes a life and career choice that not only secures the means for survival, but allows young people to gain social recognition after all. In this sense, war might become an alternative route for young people's transition into adulthood (Utas 2003: 85–117). By engaging in subcultural spaces, they find avenues to participation in conventional society (Richards 2008, Vlassenroot and van Acker 2001).

In sum, the literature on civil wars provides us with a number of clues why young people in particular come to join armed groups, i.e., how they *become* participants in armed conflict. But how do they manage to *be* participants in armed conflict? How do they learn to perpetrate violence against armed and unarmed others, and how do they adjust to their violent roles? Both the violent organisation's and the individual combatants' resources are crucial to answering these questions.

### **Armed groups and organisation(s) of violence**

Typically, combatants act violently as part – members, prisoners or staff – of armed groups. By 'armed groups', I refer to collective actors that use violence or its credible threat to realise their goals. Armed groups challenge the state's monopoly of power, either by directly opposing or fighting it, or by questioning its legitimacy or reach.<sup>4</sup> They create and enforce competing social and legal orders, and reserve the right to control territory, people, or resources. Often, they provide services and functions that replace or fill in for their public equivalents. As such, the term encompasses a wide array of collective actors – including, but not limited to, guerrillas, paramilitaries, terrorist groups, and civil defence militias.

Armed groups are not only collective actors, but organisations. As such, they

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<sup>4</sup>This definition is challenged by the existence of terrorist assassins who act on their own. However, they often perpetrate their attacks with reference to one of these groups even without formal membership status, and typically understand themselves as part and representatives of institutionalised or imagined communities (see for instance Berntzen and Sandberg 2014).

are not identical with the combatants that are part of it. Not only do they have members, but they are characterised by a set of roles, rules, and hierarchies, and command means to monitor and sanction their members to make them comply with their rules (Ahrne and Brunsson 2011, Luhmann 1995). Regularly, armed groups come into being in order to realise particular goals. Typically, these goals are political (access to power) or economic (access to resources) in nature. While this characterisation clearly posits them as task-oriented groups, they also fulfil a number of socio-emotional functions for their members.<sup>5</sup> For instance, to understand the Sicilian *Cosa Nostra* primarily as a criminal business organisation misses its character as a social institution that provides more than just opportunities to enrich its members. In the same vein, armed groups in settings of civil war provide more, and often more important, benefits than access to material goods. Among other things, they may provide their members with a vocation (Vinci 2007), a sense of belonging to a community (Vermeij 2014), and feelings of empowerment and self-worth (Baaz and Stern 2013, Peters and Richards 1998, West 2000). Because armed groups fulfil these and other functions for their members, compliance with orders and violent actions in particular do not necessarily depend on the individuals being convinced of the legitimacy of the organisation's goals or the suitability of the chosen means. That is, combatants may comply even where they question the reasonableness of the assignments given to them.

In his study of the Reserve Battalion 101 that was tasked with exterminating the Polish Jews, Browning (1992) showed that it was not, or at least not primarily, ideological conviction or successful indoctrination or “obedience to authority” (Milgram 1969) that motivated its members to kill on a large scale (Browning 1992: 159–189). In fact, most of them were repulsed by the mass killings they were expected to perform, at least initially. But refusing participation meant leaving the ‘dirty work’ to their comrades, an asocial act that was all the more isolating in an environment where their comrades were their only peer group (Browning 1992: 184–185). Similarly, in their study on cohesion and disintegration in the Wehrmacht, Shils and Janowitz (1948) found that compliance with orders was, for the most part, motivated by loyalty towards one's immediate primary group (i.e., one's squad or section). Even in the face of defeat, desertion rates were unusually low, and rose or fell as a function of the social integrity of one's primary group. Desertion rates were higher for those individual's who failed

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<sup>5</sup>The differentiation between socio-emotional and task-oriented groups goes back to Anderson (1975).

to integrate into the group, and low even among political dissidents, who justified their failure to desert with feelings of solidarity and responsibility towards the group (Shils and Janowitz 1948: 285–286). Clearly, combatants’ actions are influenced not only by their attitudes towards their assigned tasks, but also by their relationship with the group and its members. Where armed groups provide their members with a *sense of belonging*, this not only motivates their members to act violently. Moreover, the common perpetration of violence works as a source of cohesion (Shils and Janowitz 1948: 287) and identification with the group (Littman and Paluck 2015). That is, acting violently itself helps to create and confirm a group identity and individual feelings of being part of that group. Armed groups are acutely aware of the meaning of these identification processes, and will make use of institutions that encourage the creation of new group identities (Drury and Reicher 2000), or mobilise pre-existing social identities. In her study of popular participation in the Rwandan genocide, Fujii (2008) showed how ties of kin and friendship were crucial for the recruitment of young males into the killing groups, and helped hesitant members to participate in collective acts of lethal violence.

But armed groups offer more than a sense of belonging to their members. By acting as employers, armed groups provide combatants with a *vocation*. Being a combatant, or fighter, offers young males (and, although under different terms, females; see Baaz and Verweijen 2013, Coulter 2009, Utas 2005, West 2000) a more or less socially accepted occupation. It allows them to provide for themselves and for their families. By becoming armed actors, young people often leave behind a life where they sit around doing nothing, or waiting for whatever petty job might come their way. At the same time, soldiering as a profession is not just a job, i.e., a way to acquire resources and to engage in an accepted line of work. It is also an important resource for people’s identity claims. By participating in combat, people engage in an activity that can be endowed with meaning, and that as a collective enterprise transcends their personal contribution. In her study of insurgent collective action in civil war in El Salvador, Elisabeth Jean Wood (2003) shows how both pleasure in agency as a collective experience, “this redrawing of boundaries and reshaping of history by subordinate people” (Wood 2003: 235), and the value attributed to participation *as such* were crucial for ordinary people’s involvement in insurgent collective action, even where the risks clearly outweighed any expectations of personal gain. By becoming combatants, young people find a place where they don’t just belong to a group, but are seen as persons with valuable and valued skills. The emotional gratification of becoming a “committed insider” (Hundeide 2003), of being proficient in and good at some-

thing, is a powerful resource for building a positive identity. For some, doing a good job might become more important than doing the right thing – that is, the proper execution of a task might outweigh its moral implications. By focusing on the technical aspects of a task, a person’s moral questions may disappear behind its orderly and routine completion (Kelman 1973: 46–48).

For many, being a soldier is not only a profession, but a calling, and a civic duty. The military ethos that depicts soldiering as the ‘honourable profession’ of ‘courageous men’ that adhere to a strict code of conduct contributes to such an understanding. As such, taking up arms allows combatants to affirm ideas of masculinity (Baaz and Stern 2009, Stewart 2017, Theidon 2009), and to construct and reclaim for themselves an “identity of toughness” (Crowther et al. 2013). Participation in armed conflict can thereby become a *source of self-worth and empowerment*. Combatants come to perceive themselves as potent, as ‘being somebody’ who can ‘make things happen’ (see also Greiner 2010). Being a soldier may allow them to move up from a position of powerlessness to a position of efficacy.

Armed groups are at the same time collective actors and organisations. As collective actors, they reveal dynamics that go beyond organisational and rational planning. Collective identities and combatants’ self-categorisation as members or part of a group with a shared identity may arise situationally (Drury and Reicher 2000, Reicher 1984). Situations of violence are suggested to be particularly prone to unforeseen and unplanned turns and dynamics because they are emotionally intense experiences. These dynamics will be partly mitigated or managed through the armed groups themselves in their capacity as organisations (see Härtel and Schwalb 2016, Hoover Green 2011). As organisations, armed groups structure collective action through institutions. Following Berger and Luckmann (2007), I use the term ‘institution’ in a broad sense, as the sum of rules, roles, expectations and norms that in turn influence individual and collective action. As such, they are important elements of violent organisations and for the organisation of violence. They provide combatants with guidelines, blueprints or scripts on how to act (Klatetzki 2015, Schnell 2008), and frame actions as legitimate, expectable, or desirable. As such, they allow combatants to act in the first place. Armed groups’ actions and identities are both structured by institutions and situationally contingent, subject to unforeseen and unplanned for dynamics.

Armed groups like the LRA that recruit and retain their personnel through

the use and the threat of force can also be understood as ‘total institutions’ in the sense that Goffman (1990) introduced the concept. In this understanding, the total character of organisations lies in their isolation from other social groups and the wider society, an isolation which is both created by the organisation and upheld through visible (like spatial distance and guards supervising the settlements) and invisible (deterrents to leave such as violent threats) barriers. Total institutions monitor and control every aspect of their members’ lives, and enforce this claim to power through the use of sanctions. They organise and often meticulously plan all of the group’s activities as collective tasks, and assign their personnel or inmates to different positions and roles within the social universe they so create. All activities are meant to contribute to a single overall rationale or goal defined by the organisation’s high command. The strict organisation of everyday life, and the proximity and dependence between the individuals affected by it, allows total institutions to make do with a relatively small number of people entrusted with supervisory tasks. People enter total institutions as persons with different roles, affiliations, and identities – all of which will be denied to them upon their entry into the organisation. Total institutions like the LRA that are at the same time violent organisations challenge their members to retain or renegotiate their sense of self under the conditions of forced violence.

### **Agency and identity in armed action**

Evidently, violent organisations and total institutions in particular command a number of means to commit combatants to violence. But what resources do the combatants themselves mobilise in order to learn to live with war and violence? How do they position themselves in relation to the organisation’s agenda of turning them into capable, committed and loyal fighters? In this thesis, I will try to find answers by focusing on two aspects: namely, combatants’ agency and identity.

In the literature, the discussion about combatants’ agency, understood as their capacity to act, has focused on their youth and their decision to join and act as members of armed groups. How much do young combatants know about the repercussions of their actions, and how firmly are they grounded in moral imperatives that prohibit and sanction the use of violence? Do young combatants fully understand the consequences of their violent actions? How much agency does a young person, a child or adolescent have to make informed decisions? As one interviewee put it: “Can a ten years old child be a combatant or soldier? Can they make such a profound decision in life?” (Faith, ll. 912–915).

These discussions are closely connected to how young combatants are addressed as actors in armed conflict, especially under the conditions of forced recruitment. Are they victims, perpetrators, both or neither of these things? In the civil war literature, young combatants have almost unequivocally been discussed as actors who share attributes of both characterisations. They are perpetrators and victims at the same time, as violence happens *through* them as much as it happens *to* them – sometimes, but not always, simultaneously. So the question is not if young combatants are one or the other, but how these two categories can be thought of and brought together, and what they mean when applied to young combatants and situations of limited choice. Erin Baines (2009) has suggested to address these actors as “complex political perpetrators”,<sup>6</sup> which she defines as “youth who occupy extremely marginal spaces in settings of chronic crisis, and who use violence as an expression of political agency” (Baines 2009: 163). This definition points to the fact that young people’s recruitment into armed groups is often not one of the two things – either a free choice or a result of force – but a decision located somewhere between the two (see also Brett and Specht 2004: 105–119). For instance, the lack of means to provide for oneself and one’s family may ‘force’ combatants to enrol and become engaged in warfare as a means to maximise their chances of survival. Moreover, peer and community pressures might push young people to join armed groups to defend civilian communities against real or imagined threats (Castelein 2008, Fujii 2008, Koos 2014).

In this thesis, I will put aside the concepts of victim and perpetrator. As I see it, focusing on these concepts misses, or sidelines, the important point of discussing combatants’ agency. This is because perpetrator and victim are legal categories; as such, they concern, respectively, a person’s accountability and culpability, or their right to seek retribution. As I see it, the important question is not whether young combatants are legally responsible for what they did, or if and how they can seek retribution for what has been done to them. Although these are certainly important questions, they are not my questions. Here I am only interested in the agency actors exercise both by making claims of personal agency and by withdrawing themselves from it. The categories of victim and perpetrator are only relevant insofar as they are used by the research participants themselves, that is, as self-identifications or discourses that shape and frame how

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<sup>6</sup>A term she develops in reference to the concept of “complex political victims” (Bouris 2007), and that challenges the notion of victimhood as the position of being a passive and powerless bystander of one’s own life.



former combatants think and talk about themselves, and how they feel seen and talked about by others. This approach of putting the agency of young combatants front and centre has been chosen before, most notably, in the works of Alcinda Honwana (2000, 2006) and Mats Utas (2003, 2005). Both admit to the limitations in young combatants' agency, but emphasise and focus on the ways in which they encounter and make use of their however limited scopes for decision-making.

Part of combatants agency concerns not only their (physical) actions, but also their agency to make and uphold identity claims. As members of armed groups, combatants are challenged to build positive identities while assuming roles and responsibilities that are imagined as being at odds with such identities.<sup>7</sup> Violence is not only bound to a range of emotions, such as feelings of potency (Greiner 2010, von Trotha 2011), excitement (Durkheim 1984), fear (Collins 2009, Grossman 2009), rage (Scheff and Retzinger 1991), and shame and guilt (Gilligan 2000, 2003). As transgressive action that violates another person's physical integrity, violence is always in need for justification. Violent groups provide the framework for such positive identity claims as gang members (Decker 1996, Hagedorn 1998, Short 1996), soldiers (Baaz and Stern 2013), or hooligans (Buford 1991). These group identities allow people to identify with, and distance themselves from, their violent performances, either by reframing violence as necessary, heroic or innocent, or by dissociating their violent role identity from their personal identity. Combatants negotiate their roles and exercise agency as they physically act and situate themselves as violent actors and persons through both their actions and their narratives.

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<sup>7</sup>This is not only true for violent actors, but also for other stigmatised identities – for instance, being a housewife (Büchele 2017), doing a 'dirty job' (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999), being a blue-collar worker (Sennett and Cobb 1972), a thief (Cromwell and Thurman 2003), or a hitman (Levi 1981), or participating in the street (Copes et al. 2008) or night economy (Preiser 2016).

## 1.3 Research questions

Through this thesis, I intend to make an argument on the interplay of the meso and micro levels in violent action – that is, of organisations and institutions on one side and individual agency and identity on the other. I argue that this analysis will provide some new insights not only into the organisation of violence in the LRA, but into the organisation of violent collective action more generally. As I see it, the LRA is a suitable candidate for showing how the two dimensions are linked, because of both its longevity and its reliance on forced recruitment. For one thing, since the overwhelming majority of combatants didn't join the LRA on their own volition, their commitment to the armed group is neither a given nor an effect of self-selection. While combatants' motives for joining may be less relevant in the case of the LRA, the question of how the organisation manages to commit its involuntary personnel to its agenda, and how it prevents its combatants from doing a poor job or leaving the organisation, remains all the more relevant.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, the extraordinary resilience of the LRA points to the importance of organisational (in contrast to environmental) dynamics. Looking at the case of the LRA eliminates, or at least reduces, some of the background noise that makes it hard to identify the mechanisms at work.

By looking at the internal dynamics in the LRA, I will try to address two sets of questions. On the meso level, I will look at armed groups as organisations of violence. I ask: How does the LRA structure itself to realise its goals? How do its institutions influence its use of violence? How does it manage to commit its personnel to its goals and mode of operation? On the micro-level, I aim to provide some insights into the social psychology of armed action by asking: How do these directives translate into individual action? How do institutions structure individual and collective behaviour? How do individual actors cope with these violent demands? What kind of resources do they have to adapt to their roles in the LRA, to even learn to find a place where they feel at ease? How do they position themselves? What does the perpetration of violence mean for their sense of self and identity?

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<sup>8</sup>Gates and Nordås (2010) and Gates (2011) have made a strong case to look more closely at the differences between circumstances and incentives in recruitment on one side and retention on the other. Rather than seeing retention as “a mere continuation of recruitment” (Gates 2011: 39), researchers should understand motives for retention as separate, not least because deciding to join or leave an armed group requires a different kind of momentum than the (non-)decision to stay.

## 1.4 Outline

In Chapter 1, I have detailed my research questions, and provided an overview of the key concepts and theoretical contributions I draw on in this thesis. In Chapter 2, I describe the methodological approach to both the data collection during my field research and the data analysis. I highlight some of the challenges of doing research with former combatants in a post-conflict society, and detail my experiences and possible shortcomings of the collected data. Chapter 3 gives a short overview of the armed group's history and the political prequel to its emergence. As such, it is a highly selective history that focuses on aspects related to the identity conflicts and ethnic politics that, as I argue, lie at the heart of the conflict. I show how people's memories of what happened shape their perceptions of the conflict up to today. These perceptions both precede armed action and create the environment in which the LRA operates. As such, they offer an explanation for the LRA's resilience and its use of violence on the macro level.

In Chapter 4, I analyse and discuss the data I collected to answer my research questions. Each of this chapter's seven subsections addresses a particular aspect of what it meant for the research participants to become, and to be, combatants in the LRA. Chapter 4.1 deals with the initiation and socialisation of new combatants into the organisation. I show how becoming a member of the LRA is not experienced as a singular event, but as a process of social becoming. This process is performed through a number of status passages in which abductees are asked to commit themselves to the organisation, thereby becoming full members. In Chapter 4.2, I detail which resources combatants have and use to adjust to their violent lives. I show how everyday life is both an organisational and an individual accomplishment, in which institutions and routines, but also narrative and practical efforts to create some kind of normalcy, play a central role for combatants' immersion in 'bush life'. Chapter 4.3 addresses combatants' agency in the process of becoming and acting as part of the LRA. I show how combatants' narratives are testimonies not only of forced obedience, but of their active engagement with organisational demands through acts of both hidden resistance and active compliance. Through these actions, they become invested; they commit themselves; they find spaces to escape within and, thereby, to stay. Chapter 4.4 deals with the question of how combatants manage to lead violent lives on a psychological level: how they make sense of the violence they commit, witness and experience,

and how they understand themselves as perpetrators, bystanders and victims of violence. I show that their narratives, *the stories they tell themselves about themselves*, are a vital means to resolve the conflict between individual claims to a moral identity and the organisation's violent demands. Chapter 4.5 is devoted to the roles and living realities of female combatants in the military and domestic sphere. I show that women performed a number of often conflicting roles on and off the battlefield that became vital for the constitution of everyday life in the LRA. More importantly, women were not passive bystanders to this dynamic, but instead actively negotiated their roles through both their actions and their narratives. Chapter 4.6 addresses the question of how combatants relate to the political struggle of the LRA. It shows how many combatants, though they didn't choose to live in and work for the LRA, attribute some kind of legitimacy to its fight. I argue that these legitimacy beliefs are crucial to understanding combatants' motivation to stay in or leave the bush. Chapter 4.7 looks at the decisions and challenges involved in returning from captivity and in readjusting to civilian life. I argue that the experience of return isn't limited to combatants' escape, but continues in their struggles to become civilians again and to make sense of their violent past.

I see the analytical sections as pieces of a puzzle that, together, provide a quite powerful image of what it means to become, and to be, a combatant by chance. The fifth and final chapter will summarise the results of the thesis and provide an assessment of their relevance for the challenges involved in disarming and reintegrating former combatants and in reconstructing society after mass violence.

## 2.1 *The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves:*<sup>1</sup>

### Narrative criminology and the challenge of analysing combatants' stories

#### Narrative criminology as research paradigm

This thesis is an attempt to find answers to the following questions: How do combatants in the LRA understand not only the LRA's fight, but their engagement in it? How do they make sense of their roles as violent actors? What does the organisation of the LRA contribute to these processes of sense-making?

Before I dive into the analysis, a more basic question needs to be addressed: What can interviews with former combatants contribute to answering these questions? Which insights can be gained from the self-stories of the violent actors themselves? This question – what kind of data does one expect to emerge from the interviews? – is relevant not only for the study of violent actors, but for interview-based research more generally.

In her study of violent offenders, Lois Presser (2008) presents a helpful distinction between three epistemological approaches. She argues that researchers can treat narratives (1) as records, (2) as interpretations, and (3) as shapers of experience.

If we treat *narratives as records*, we make a statement about the epistemo-

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<sup>1</sup>I owe the idea for this title to Ada Nissen, who used it in a presentation of her PhD project on Norwegian peace diplomacy. It goes back to an argument Clifford Geertz (1973: 448) made in his *Notes on the Balinese Cockfight*: “Its [the cockfight's] function, if you want to call it that, is interpretive: it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves.”

logical status of narratives, affirming that they tell us something about facts (for instance, deviant behaviour) in the world. It implies thinking about narratives as being true or false. This approach depends on research participants telling us the truth, and, more importantly, on the premise that there is something like the truth. Thus, interviews are a means to gather information about certain events – for instance, massacres: When did it happen? How did it start? What happened to whom? What kinds of weapons were used? – and so on. This approach is well grounded in a positivist research tradition.

In contrast, the understanding of *narrative as interpretations* departs from a constructivist stance. Narratives are not about objective facts, but about how actors perceive and interpret things in the world, and what circumstances they understand as causing chains of events to unfold. Why did the massacre happen? Who started the hostile actions that led to it? In this understanding, interviews serve as a means to access the actors' interpretations of events and actions.

To see *narratives as shapers of experience* differs from these approaches in an important respect. In this understanding, experiences are not just 'there', waiting to be narrated and interpreted by the actors. They are accessible only through their narrative processing. In this sense, the experience is a genuine product of its narration; experience and narration create each other. This is how narrative criminology looks at the accounts of delinquent or violent actors, and how I will look at large parts of the accounts of my interviewees. To choose this approach means to understand social and deviant action in particular as the result or validation of a story the actors tell themselves – and others – about themselves. These narratives are self-stories they want not only themselves but also others to believe in, to make authentic identity claims.<sup>2</sup>

Positioning narrative criminology in an old debate, it is situated right between agency (which stories do I want to tell?) and structure (which narrative means do I have to do that?). It posits that our narrative is a joint product of language that is activated and language that is available (Sandberg 2010: 455).

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<sup>2</sup>Here and in line with the premises of narrative criminology, 'narrative' and 'story' are used interchangeably, and always encompass accounts that make claims to an individual or group identity (Presser 2013).

**Narrative identity: Storytelling as negotiation of identity**

What all narratives have in common is that they make claims to an individual or collective identity (Presser 2013). As such, identity, or more precisely narrative identity, is a central concept for the study of narratives. What does ‘narrative identity’ mean? Importantly, it means to see narratives as sites for the negotiation of identities. In this understanding, identities do not precede their narrative imagining, but come into being as people construct them through their narratives: “the story answers to the man” (Ricoeur 1991: 30). Identities only ‘exist’ insofar as people build them through their self-stories.

A person’s story is not the same as the story of their life, i.e. a complete history of everything that has happened to that person. It “draws selectively upon lived experience. [...] It must start and end somewhere; it must emphasize some events and not others to make a point” (Presser 2004: 179). When constructing a narrative, we not only structure experience, but give meaning to the incidents involved. In order to create a coherent story, one that ‘adds up’, we will leave out parts and add or emphasise others, thereby weighting their importance to the story. These adjustments are as inevitable and subconscious as they are deliberate and strategic. The resulting narrative says as much about the events as it says about us, about who we want to be and what we (want to) believe to be true. We tell these stories not only for our own sake, but also to and for others. In this sense, self-stories always emerge against the background of a more or less intimate public sphere. These accounts affirm, build and negotiate identity claims beyond the story told. This position relies on an understanding of identity as dynamic, in flux, and provisional (Presser 2008: 3). Our stories are open to new turns and points, because we don’t know where they will lead us, or where we are going to lead them: “We are in the middle of our stories and cannot be sure how they will end; we are constantly having to revise the plot as new events are added to our lives” (Presser 2008: 4). Our stories change as new events become part of them, and as we become, or try to become, someone else. Not only does every situation offer different alternatives for acting, but the same is true for how we tell our stories and, thereby, understand ourselves.

Narrative criminology gives due attention to the fact that storytelling is *performative action*, an “enactment of identity” (Presser 2008: 133). In sharing and structuring their stories, in choosing what to tell and how, research participants ask researchers to buy into their version of the events, to accept their identity claims, and to adopt their evaluations of the (il)legitimate action, politics, and

constraints and freedoms involved. In this sense, research interviews are sites for the negotiation of identities (Presser 2004). They are a vital display of the agency interviewees have and use, and question the image of an all-powerful interviewer at the steering wheel and merely responsive interviewees sitting in the back seat of the research process.

As all interview data results from an interaction between researcher and research participant, the stories that emerge are negotiations “between my informants and their memories, but ultimately between my informants and myself, between them as narrators and myself as listener and producer of text and analysis” (Coulter 2009: 20). As such, all qualitative research data is a joint product of the interaction between the two (or more) parties involved. As a consequence, the researchers’ identities, interactions and approaches will critically influence what the resulting data looks like.

### Identity, narration, and action

To just say “Well I’m a criminal,” that’s not a very positive, assertive thing to say about yourself. You know, you start believin’ that stuff, and then the next thing you know you’re doin’ what *criminals* do. (Tim, interviewed for and cited in Presser 2008: 110; emphasis in original)

Why do interviewees put so much effort into creating a story they want others to believe in? After all, their relationship with the researcher is typically rather casual. Why are they invested in their stories? First of all, interviewees tell their stories not just, or even primarily, for the researcher; they tell them for themselves. The research participants’ commitment to their stories is what separates an authentic narrative from a made-up tale. They themselves believe, or want to believe, in the stories they tell. But why is that? Narrative criminologists argue that these narratives are a crucial means both to make sense of the world and to make sense of oneself. We can only understand ourselves, who we are, through our stories.

These different narrative goals – making sense of the world and making sense of oneself – are inextricably linked, because they provide a guide to action. The kind of person I am, or claim to be, by means of my narrative, frames and limits



possible action. For instance, if I like to think of myself as an honest person, I will have trouble telling an outright lie. Some actions will become unthinkable, others at least questionable. But the opposite is also true: Our stories become a means to (re-)evaluate our actions so that they become compatible with the identity claims we make. If telling a lie is in conflict with seeing myself as an honest person, my narrative can become a means to convince myself that, for whatever reason, this lie *doesn't really count*.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, narratives are also performances that try to create coherence between identity claims and social action (Linde 1993). In many situations, our values, morals, and character traits do not present us with a straight-forward answer on how to handle a given situation. Narratives help to bridge this gap between identity and action.

The narrative looks both backward, trying to understand the self through past action, and forward, guiding future interpretations and actions. Narrative criminology makes an argument on the power of narratives to motivate and premeditate actions: “Narrative criminology is challenged to show that story precedes action: people talk themselves into engaging in some behaviour even as they also talk after doing it” (Presser 2012: 9). Thus, narratives can become antecedents to crime (Presser 2009: 178), convincing or allowing people to engage in violent action, because they see their acts as just, legitimate, or negligible. By giving legitimacy to deviant acts, narratives might help actors adjust to a violent identity, or to distance themselves from these actions even while committing them (for instance, by appealing to higher authorities, or by claiming a momentary lapse in judgement: “The devil made me do it” (Cromwell and Thurman 2003)).

Of course, individual and collective violence in civil wars is different in many regards from violence in civilian settings. Shoplifting and even armed robbery is not the same as looting and raiding civilian settlements. Domestic violence is different from institutionalised sexual abuse. This is even more true in the context of the LRA, where most combatants perpetrated violence not through their own initiative and convictions, but as a result of (the credible threat of) force. Still, even forced combatants have to make sense of their actions and find ways to give meaning to their violent lifestyle. In my thesis, I will treat narrative criminology not as an all-encompassing way to decipher individual and collective violence in civil wars, but as a way to look at the empirical material, in particular,

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<sup>3</sup>I will talk about these ‘techniques of neutralization’ (Sykes and Matza 1957) more detailed in Chapter 4.4 starting on page 121.

the interviews with former combatants.

## 2.2 Doing research with former combatants in a post-conflict setting

### What are true stories?

One question that poses a challenge to research with violent offenders is whether research participants tell us the truth. Do they omit shameful or possibly self-incriminating actions and attitudes from their stories? Do they only tell us what (they assume) we want to hear? Can we trust their sincerity and their recollection? How can we possibly know if research participants tell us the truth? These questions seem to be even more critical when it comes to acts of violence that happened a long time ago, that are linked to traumatic memories and that have gone through a treadmill of interpretive discourses in local communities, among policy actors and last but not least in the international community.

So what if research participants, in one way or another, don't tell us the truth? The first question is, as Sandberg (2010) points out, does it matter? It depends. If we are looking for facts as the foundation for our arguments, that is, if we treat narratives as records, it certainly does. But this is only relevant for part of this analysis, namely, where I look into the organisational structure of the LRA – for instance, how they set up their settlements, which rules they enforced, or the tactics they used on the battlefield. These questions are typically just the background to the interviewees' stories; they may misremember, but there's nothing to make sense of in the first place. Moreover, these aspects can be cross-checked, at least to a certain degree.<sup>4</sup> As for the interviewees' stories, I understand that these are not and cannot be true or false in the same sense. Rather, the question is: Why do people tell their stories the way they do, with all their inconsistencies, gaps and additions?

In a paper based on her field research on the Rwandan genocide, Lee Ann Fujii (2010) argues for the inclusion of what she calls 'meta-data' in the analysis; i.e. the rumours, inventions, denials, evasions, and silences that emerge in and around interview situations. She claims that attention to meta-data is crucial to access the research participants' motives and inclinations to lie, omit things,

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<sup>4</sup>Sandberg (2010: 453) makes this argument for the narratives of drug dealers: information on drug prices and the organisation of transactions can be cross-checked among their narratives, because there is no reason to suspect that they have collaborated on their accounts.

avoid certain topics, or hold information and emotions back. She makes an argument for the inclusion of meta-data as a means to both improve data quality and ensure the ethical conduct of research (for instance, where participation might put interviewees at risk). Importantly, meta-data itself is data as it becomes part of the stories interviewees tell us. In what follows, I will outline how questions of truth and falsehood, of fact and fiction – in short: meta-data – impact the process of data collection, and what that means for the analysis of interviews with former combatants against the backdrop of a narrative criminology approach and my experiences in the field.

*Inventions.* Interviewees make decisions not only about what to tell, but also about how to tell it. This ‘how’ is not only about the things they do (not) tell, but also about the minor and major adjustments they make to create the story and identity of their imagination. Life as it happens has no plot, no inherent ‘storyline’, no self-evident moral. Meaning is not inherent to our lives, but the result of narrative efforts to find and to claim it. To do that, people change bits and pieces of the story to fit what happened into a plot. These inventions, as additions and changes to a story, are as inevitable and subconscious as they are deliberate and strategic. From a narrative criminology stance, the task is not to separate truthful from deceptive accounts, but to understand why research participants tell their stories the way they do, and why they want us to believe them. I would like to give an example from my research: On one occasion, I met with a former high-ranking commander who had just returned from the bush. The terms of his disengagement were unclear – while some sources (among others, the Ugandan military) said he was captured, it was also rumoured that he left the organisation voluntarily (he himself claimed that he organised his escape). What was known for sure was that he had joined the LRA voluntarily, in its early days when abductions weren’t part of its standard repertoire. For all these reasons, I was more than eager to talk to him. The story he presented us with, though, was an adaptation of the prototypical story of violent initiation and retention: He claimed that he was ‘convinced’ at gunpoint to join the LRA, and was constantly confronted with threats of retaliation against his community if he ever tried to escape. His account wasn’t mere fiction – some of it matched with established events – but his overall story just didn’t add up. My cautious attempts to question his account were met with resistance on his part. While the interview fell short of my hope to find out what encouraged fighters to join the LRA voluntarily, it was instructive nonetheless. More than anything, it showed how powerful a particular narrative of forced participation had become, and how

well aware the interviewee was that his terms of engagement would not be met with the same level of sympathy. In trying to portray himself as a decent person that only fell prey to circumstances beyond his control, the interviewee engaged in identity work.

*Silences.* When it came to accounts of traumatic experiences, interviewees often chose to remain silent on certain painful, self-incriminating, or shameful occurrences. These silences are part of the interviewees' agency (see also Hammond 2011), i.e., of their power to tell *their* story and to protect themselves from harm. During my interviews, silences emerged around accounts of sexual violence (see also Fujii 2010), interviewees' own violent acts, and sensitive information that they felt might put them or others at risk. Part of the researcher's obligation to 'do no harm' is the imperative not to inquire where research participants aren't willing to share certain experiences. The question is, as Daniel (1996: 121) put it, how does the researcher work with the interviewees' stories "when the most poignant parts of their voices are their silences?" I tried not to make any assumptions based on these silences. For instance, the absence of stories of sexual violence doesn't mean that my interviewees didn't experience it.<sup>5</sup> Also, I tried not to force sensitive questions on the interviewees. For instance, I never brought up the issue of sexual violence myself. Instead, I asked the interviewees how they related with their spouses and superiors. Such open questions left it to the interviewees to decide what they wanted to share with us. While some interviewees chose not to address these issues, others shared insightful stories of the abuse they experienced.

*Rumours.* Rumours – about the LRA's movements, its *modus operandi* and, most importantly, the terms of return to civilian life – played an important role in people's lives during the war. But they also helped former combatants to navigate their lives afterwards and the interview situation itself. For instance, rumours about the subsequent prosecution of rank-and-file soldiers who had been guaranteed amnesty by the Amnesty Act (Government of Uganda 2000) may have kept interviewees from talking about their own participation in violent acts, as they couldn't be sure that we were not, in fact, investigators, and that the information they shared was safe with us. Considerations like these not only affected the data collection, but told us something about how people perceive these events

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<sup>5</sup>This might be particularly true in cases where victimisation has no legitimacy, for instances, in cases of male-to-male rape.

and their involvement, and how they cope with emerging insecurities. Rumours help them to manage these states of uncertainty.

*Denials.* Denials often evolved around individual acts of violence, the possession of weapons, personal responsibility, acts of disobedience, and abusive relationships with spouses or co-wives. Interviewees often denied one of these things when I raised the topic head-on, but during the interview, they often recounted incidents that were in conflict with their overall denial. These denials weren't necessarily attempts to deceive, but often seemed to serve as a means to preclude a discussion they didn't want to have, or one that undercut their story. For instance, by portraying the relationship with their husbands as good, women avoided having to talk about abuse and victimisation. Likewise, denying any possibility of circumventing the LRA's rules allowed the research participants to depict the LRA as all-powerful and their actions as inevitable. By denying that they held a rank, interviewees could avoid questions of responsibility and accountability. Denials have to be seen in light of the overall story interviewees want to tell, as a means to cut off storylines that don't belong to it or that question their overall story.

*Evasions.* Evasions took different forms; they could precede the interview, or become apparent in the interview situation itself. People only rarely declined to be interviewed at all<sup>6</sup> (even though some seem to have done so in effect, by being hard to reach after the initial contact), and most of the time willingly agreed to be interviewed. However, people were sometimes unresponsive during the interview, answering questions in a very general and offhand manner.<sup>7</sup> Or they were generally open and just unwilling to talk about a certain topic. More often, interviewees avoided talking about their own experiences, and talked instead about how things were done 'in the bush' or 'by the LRA' (see also Baaz and Stern 2009). Sometimes, especially when it came to sensitive issues such as atrocities, I employed that strategy myself, asking interviewees whether they were aware of or had witnessed any atrocities against civilians or colleagues. This allowed the research participants to talk about atrocities without addressing their personal

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<sup>6</sup>This apparently happened for a couple of people who were contacted by one of the interviewees (who acted as a mentor for a group of returnees). While the interviewee was very responsive and even offered himself to facilitate contact, only two of the people he asked responded positively, while the others lamented that the interview would only profit the researcher and not those who volunteered the information.

<sup>7</sup>Some of these interviews have been excluded from the core sample; see Chapter 2.3 starting on page 37.

involvement.<sup>8</sup>

Looking at how interviewees employ these narrative strategies tells us a lot about how they make sense of their experiences in the LRA. Working with a narrative criminology approach is not about finding ways to make interviewees tell us ‘the truth’, but about treating the way they tell their stories as data. Though it is interested in authentic accounts, that is, in stories the interviewees themselves (want to) believe in, it posits that “‘truth’ may not be the best measure of interesting and theoretically relevant data” (Sandberg 2010: 448). Such a research approach allows for inconsistencies and argumentative shifts in the research participants’ narratives without having to assume a breach in sincerity. We can offer different accounts for the same actions, and no one of them may be more authentic than the others, because they pursue different narrative goals. Every story can be told in a myriad of ways, with different plots, morals, and heroes or villains.

### The ethics of conducting research in post-conflict societies: Research as intervention



Figure 2.1: The economy of aid in Gulu’s Senior Quarters (photo by author)

When I first went to the field in late 2012, my research proposal wasn’t exactly met with enthusiasm. Many of the organisations I contacted weren’t interested in supporting my research. In their view, it was something that had been researched

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<sup>8</sup>On some occasions, this strategy may have kept them from talking about their own deeds, but in my experience, interviewees rather talked about these in passing, if at all. In contrast, most research participants talked relatively freely about atrocities they witnessed or heard of.

exhaustively before and wasn't worth further investigation. Much of the scepticism I encountered was well-founded: Since the conflict largely left Ugandan territory in 2006, northern Uganda has seen a large influx of researchers working on conflict-related issues and with war-affected communities and former combatants in particular. While there wasn't much literature addressing the questions I was interested in, there was indeed a lot of research with the very people I was interested in talking with. Some gatekeepers were rightly concerned about the long-term impact of the permanent presence of foreign researchers on northern Ugandan society. Others worried that the continuous research on war and its effects would prove to be an obstacle to post-conflict recovery. Quite visibly, aid economy and advocacy research have undermined displays of strength and generosity by forcing people to showcase their vulnerability (see also Edmondson 2005).

People deal with such demands differently, sometimes actively subverting and resisting the dependency on conditional aid.<sup>9</sup> But even where individuals find ways to make international attention work for them, the impact of foreign aid, research activities, and advocacy work on northern Ugandan society at large is still significant. Until very recently, access to conflict-related foreign aid has been a major economic factor in the North. This has been especially true in the town of Gulu which, not having much in the way of agriculture or industry, “developed an almost exclusively humanitarian economy” (Branch 2013: 3156). In a way, as one of my informants<sup>10</sup> stated with regards to the reintegration centres, aid has turned out to prolong captivity: a state of complete dependency without personal responsibility, as a form of *patronising* (and potentially disabling) *care* that is accepted because it increases the chances of survival. Even if most researchers do not offer much in the way of financial assistance, their presence and questions continue to shape the way northern Ugandans think about themselves. They have come to understand ‘conflict’ as a label that is both helping and hurting, generating funds to reconstruct society but also hindering Acholiland from moving beyond it. The town of Gulu is probably the best depiction of this twofold

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<sup>9</sup>For some time, the performance of traditional reconciliation rituals (such as *mato oput*) was very popular with many non-governmental organisations (NGOs), who encouraged them even where they didn't fit traditional purposes (Anett Pfeiffer Tumusiime, personal conversation, February 2016). A colleague in Gulu recounted an instance where a village requested assistance for a cleansing ceremony – a goat, some chicken, drinks – and used these commodities to perform a social event rather than a ritual (Lioba Lenhart, personal conversation, November 2012).

<sup>10</sup>Ocitti David, former combatant and founder of *Pathways to Peace Uganda*, an organisation that facilitates the reunion of returnees with their families, in a personal conversation, February 2016.



dynamic: an ever-growing city bustling with activity that is, to a significant extent, created by the presence of foreign researchers, aid workers, and investors.<sup>11</sup>

It is a legitimate question: Is it responsible and ethical to conduct research in this setting? Isn't there an obligation to 'stay out', in order to protect the societies in question from harm? I am not sure. Against this reading, one could argue that staying out is also a way to incapacitate local actors, who often have a better understanding of what it means for them to participate in research or not. Most of my interviewees showed a clear understanding of the aim of research on their experiences in general – certainly an effect of the continual coming and going of researchers in northern Uganda. They knew that the interview was a short-term engagement rather than a long-term obligation, and presented their requests for support knowing that our resources were limited in time and scope. Over the last few years, attention to the conflict and to them as former combatants has diminished, and many interviewees told us that they were happy to tell their stories now, as time has distanced them from their experiences of abduction and violence. Others felt comforted by the fact that their suffering and struggles haven't been forgotten. They wanted their stories of what they had to go through and what was done to them to be told and made known. Some interviewees also showed interest in the research results.

As to whether the continuous presence of foreign researchers and their concern with the conflict helps or hinders post-war recovery, I suppose that both are true: The questions researchers ask former combatants and that former combatants ask themselves have the potential to both further or interfere with individuals' coping strategies. Research intervenes in people's lives in ways that can neither be controlled nor predicted. And as much as the premise of doing no harm should guide all research, researchers can only vouch for the ethical conduct of research and not for its long-term effects. Next to the obligation to protect research participants from harm, for me this meant to take the research participants' concerns and requests seriously. Many research participants voiced their disappointment and frustration with researchers who promised to update them about the progress of the research, but never got back to them after conducting the research interview.<sup>12</sup> It seems that much of the ambivalence towards interview requests does

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<sup>11</sup>Although much of the attention has shifted over the last years to other research topics, agendas, and areas, by and large, this characterisation still holds true.

<sup>12</sup>This observation has also been made by Browne and Moffett (2014: 229) and Coulter (2009: 26) for the case of Sierra Leone.

not stem from interviewees misunderstanding the nature of research, but from their frustration with promises being broken. Now that northern Uganda is recovering from the conflict, former combatants are claiming ownership of their stories. In this sense, this research might provide some new insights into former combatants' life-worlds at a moment when the world has moved on to other, more urgent states of emergency. Focusing on their agency in dealing both with their past and present and with the research situation also provides a counter-narrative to their common depiction as helpless victims, or, as Honwana (2006: 73) put it, "empty vessels into whom violence was poured".

### **On the caveats and challenges in interpreting testimonies of former combatants**

This thesis pursues two research interests: On the meso level, it aims to show how organisation and institutions allow for the routine perpetration of violence in the LRA. On the micro level, it explores how individual actors cope with this violent everyday life, how they make sense of themselves and their actions. Though the same material is used to answer these two questions – namely, interviews with former combatants – the data analysis faces different challenges and limitations.

Interviewing former combatants presents a number of methodological challenges. In her thesis on the Salvadorian civil war, Elisabeth Wood (2003) identified three factors that shape data: (1) the respondents' initial memories, (2) the shaping of memories through social and cultural processes (the narrativity of experiences and memories), and (3) the respondents' objectives (Wood 2003: 33). Beyond these three, I argue that (4) researchers' objectives, and (5) the interaction between researcher and research participant greatly affect what the data looks like.

*Respondents' initial memories: Experiencing, remembering, and narrating war and violence.* Retrospective consideration is an innate feature of studies on violence and war. In-situ approaches – like participant observation and interviews with active combatants – are typically not possible or safe, or they interfere too much with people's routine behaviour.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, research on violence and criminal behaviour routinely relies on retrospective description, that is, on stories

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<sup>13</sup>One of the few studies that researched active armed groups (in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)) in their everyday is Hedlund (2014).

recounted “sur le registre de la mémoire” (Shepler et al. 2002: 50).<sup>14</sup> How do people remember and recount war and violence? This is where things get messy. Not everything that is remembered can and will be recounted; and on a more basic level, not everything that is experienced will be remembered. For instance, episodes of intense and excessive violence are more likely to be remembered, and are typically remembered in more detail.<sup>15</sup> But in cases of severe violence, forgetting and choosing to forget can also be functional, both for communities as a whole (Buckley-Zistel 2006) and for individuals (Hatzfeld 2004: 262). Among the former combatants we interviewed, some had just recently returned from the bush, while others had returned more than a decade earlier (see Table 1). Their narratives are not a straightforward account of the events in question, but one that is partial, biased, and modified. The interviewees don’t provide accounts of the past as it happened or as it has been experienced, but of the past as seen from the present. As such, the interviewees’ stories are not about their experiences of life in the LRA, but about their imagining of this violent past as they understand it today. This is an important difference that might render some observations invalid, because we cannot know for sure which parts of the story have been added after the fact, for instance, in former combatants’ efforts to overcome their violent past. It is largely unavoidable that former combatants’ stories are a mere proxy for their experiences *in situ*. What we get to know about war and violence does not depend only on what interviewees remember and incorporate into their stories, but on what they learn about war in the first place. Even former combatants had only partial insight into what happened in the organisation. Their experiences and level of participation differed depending on their place in the chain of command, their affiliations, age, and sex. Younger and lower-ranking combatants (and women in particular) often had only a limited understanding of where they were, what the political environment looked like, and what capacities and strengths the organisation had. Higher-ranking combatants were often quite knowledgeable about these things, but were more detached from the experiences of rank-and-file and especially female combatants.

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<sup>14</sup>A fact that, as Sandberg (2010: 451) notes, has been downplayed in much of ethnographic research.

<sup>15</sup>Apart from my experiences in the field, this has also been supported by a randomised experimental study by Bornstein et al. (1998). In the experiment, the authors assigned research participants to one of two groups. All participants were shown the same film, except that a violent scene in one group’s version was replaced by a non-violent scene in the other’s. The research participants that saw the violent version were more successful in remembering the scene in question, but less successful in recalling what happened before and after.

*The narratibility of experiences and memories.* How do interviewees talk about their experiences? Former combatants' self-representations and narratives are affected by the ways in which they learn to convey their experiences. They may resort to standardised narratives which fulfil a number of functions: They help the former combatants to structure their stories, for instance, by following a salvation theme.<sup>16</sup> They allow them to fit the chaotic and often conflicting reality of living with war and violence into a linear and unified narrative (Edmondson 2005: 452). They reduce the complexity of lived experiences to a simple, or at least simpler, storyline, making it both accessible to an outsider (and, often, to themselves) and communicable for the narrator. Also, former combatants may find some comfort in using a shared narrative of abduction and forced violence through which they can identify as part of a community. Moreover, resorting to a public narrative may also be a way to protect themselves from confronting intimate and potentially traumatising experiences.

*Interviewees' own objectives.* The research participants not only respond to the questions posed by the interviewer, but bring their own agendas to the research (see also Hedlund 2014: 34). Interviewees have two basic objectives that may interfere with the researcher's agenda: They want to (1) protect themselves from harm, and (2) profit from the research in some way.

(1) Interviews with former combatants in settings of civil war are inherently sensitive, because interviewees are being asked for potentially self-incriminating information. Research participants will ask themselves whether they can trust the researcher with their story. In 2000, the Amnesty Act was passed, granting amnesty to Ugandans "involved in acts of a war-like nature in various parts of the country" (Government of Uganda 2000). In May 2012, the Amnesty Act expired, and it hasn't been fully reinstated since. The ongoing legal proceedings against the former LRA combatants Thomas Kwoyelo and Dominic Ongwen have added to a sense of legal insecurity. However, even though many interviewees were disappointed by the reintegration efforts, only a few feared prosecution. But beyond the potential legal implications that are a rather faint threat for most of them, they are concerned with judgement, mostly from their communities. While most interviewees said they related well with other community members, many of them

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<sup>16</sup>Such *narratives of redemption*, as I would like to call them, present a powerful narrative that is supported by the NGO and aid sector, and that "condense[s] the children's pasts into a single tale of terror, hardship, and restoration" (Edmondson 2005: 451), with evil-minded rebels on one side of the equation and the government forces as saviours and protectors on the other.

reported that they had experienced some judgement. Typically, this included the assumption that former combatants returned as ‘damaged goods’ or even ‘ticking bombs’, that is, as people prone to resort to violence to solve their problems. They had to make an effort to convince other community members that they in fact had left their violent lifestyle behind.<sup>17</sup> Talking about the struggles they face today and about the things they found easier to deal with or even enjoyed in the bush might feel like jeopardising the efforts they have made to prove themselves as good and ordinary persons. The aim of portraying themselves as rehabilitated persons might interfere with the intention to give a straightforward and possibly more ambivalent account of their experiences. Moreover, people might try to protect themselves from psychological damage by choosing not to talk about certain issues such as experiences of abuse and violence.

(2) The interviewees will use the research interview to attain some positive goals. Obviously, material expectations often influence people’s willingness to talk; but more importantly, non-material expectations will greatly influence how the interviewees approach the interview situation, and which aspects of their story they want to emphasise. Former combatants quickly learned the vocabulary of aid agencies and political actors, and may use it to tell and sell their stories, often times generating accounts in “victim mode” (Utas 2003: 49). Discourses also influence what can be articulated at all (Das 1996), that is, what is seen as a legitimate expression. For instance, in an environment that makes great efforts to stress the involuntary, forced nature of participation in armed resistance, it becomes almost impossible to admit to be committed to it. Former combatants might try to portray themselves as a certain kind of person (decent, God-fearing, knowledgeable), use the interview situation to build relationships with people who are, in one way or another, imagined as resourceful, or ask the researcher to advocate for the interviewee’s concerns. While exploring these agendas is a research interest (namely, in violent actors’ agency), they also show that interview-based research is not a one-way street.

*Researcher’s objectives: Representation.* The data basis for analysis depends not only on what the interviewee is willing and able to tell us, but also on the researcher’s objectives and strategies: What and whom do I ask? What stories am I interested in? Research on war and violence looks at a human experience that is, for most people, something out of the ordinary. Its most extreme expressions fascinate humans as much as they frighten them. When one researches an

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<sup>17</sup>I will elaborate on this in more detail in Chapter 4.7 starting on page 178.

everyday life that is marked by war and violence, one challenge is to not overestimate the importance or prevalence of outstanding occurrences. For instance, the killing of family members as a means of violent initiation into the LRA was cited a lot in the advocacy and parts of the academic literature (see for instance Bogner and Rosenthal 2014, Eichstaedt 2009, Human Rights Watch 2003), but wasn't reported by any of my research participants.<sup>18</sup> Where first-hand information is scarce, there is a pattern of reproducing the same information over and over again (Hedlund 2014: 38), sometimes with effects not unlike those of playing Chinese whispers. Other forms of violence – for instance, male-to-male rape – are missing from much of the literature, not necessarily because the victims remain silent,<sup>19</sup> but also because they do not fit the dominant discourse (in this case, of gender-based violence that targets women and girls).<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the experiences of particular groups of former combatants are under-represented, due to remote location, access and language barriers, among other factors. Adding to this selection bias, much of the research done by humanitarian and advocacy organisations has focused on young combatants (typically under the banner of child soldiering),<sup>21</sup> and has mostly addressed their abuse and not their agency.<sup>22</sup> And there is also a greater focus on male combatants – underscoring a common perception of women as mere auxiliaries or spoils of war – that privileges their experiences over those of women.

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<sup>18</sup>While some might have omitted such occurrences from their stories, it makes sense that these violent performances are not part of the organisation's standard operating procedure. The majority of the abductions happened at night, with the government forces not too far away. Typically, the LRA couldn't afford the luxury of staying in the same place for too long, for the sole purpose of setting an example; it would have attracted too much attention, thereby risking confrontation with government forces. More likely, they would do so later, after they had left the civilian settlements with the newly abducted. Moreover, as (Dolan 2009: 79) points out, atrocities like mutilations weren't a constant, but were more widespread in some years, notably 1991 and 1996. See also Chapter 3 starting on page 43.

<sup>19</sup>Some of the people I talked to mentioned sexual violence against men (*tek gungu* – literally, 'hard to bend'; a term that only emerged as a reaction to such rapes by the National Resistance Army (NRA) (Oloya 2013: 49)) in passing, when talking about the atrocities committed by the government forces, but they never discussed any personal experiences. A number of personal accounts can be found in the video documentary "Gender against Men" (Refugee Law Project 2009) and Wambui (2014).

<sup>20</sup>Chris Dolan, one of the few researchers concerned with the phenomenon, poignantly commented on this institutional silencing: "The organisations working on sexual and gender-based violence don't talk about it (...) There's a fear among them that this is a zero-sum game; that there's a pre-defined cake and if you start talking about men, you're going to somehow eat a chunk of this cake that's taken them a long time to bake" (Storr 2011).

<sup>21</sup>A United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) study published in 2001 estimated that the 20'000 adults abducted between 1986 and 2001 represented two thirds of overall abductions. (Dolan 2009: 75).

<sup>22</sup>This has been analysed with sharp criticism by Utas (2003: 52–53).

In this sense, the results of my research cannot be seen as representative of experiences in ‘the’ LRA. While my interview sample included women and men equally, I didn’t talk to people who were abducted from or returned to places outside of Uganda, and whose experiences differ in some regards.<sup>23</sup> Combatants who spent most of their time in the LRA in Uganda in the early 1990s tell a story that is different in many regards from that of somebody who left Uganda in, say, 2004, and spent years in Sudan, Congo and CAR (not to mention those who were abducted outside of Uganda). What they perceived and portrayed as the everyday life of the organisation may differ to a large extent, and one would have to talk to many more combatants than I did to do justice to the multitude of experiences. One might argue that this approach won’t yield a full picture of the dynamics within the LRA. This is true, but such a task is beyond the scope of this thesis. Moreover, the data is diverse enough as it is. The fact that the LRA has been in existence for so long, and that it has changed its strategies and institutions along the way to account for changing environments, makes a comprehensive account of the LRA a much larger project than can be realised here.

*Interaction between researcher, interviewee and third parties.* Apart from my research interest and approach, my person and the way I interacted with the interviewees clearly influenced what the interviewees were willing to share, and how they presented their stories. The interview data is a joint product, or co-creation if you will, of the researcher and the interviewee. And that is not just because the researcher is typically the one asking the questions and thereby structuring the answers. The impression the interviewees have about who they are talking to will undoubtedly affect how they talk about their experiences. My identity as a young white woman clearly influenced people’s perceptions, expectations and the way they told their story. My unfamiliarity with the interviewees’ life-worlds might have closed some doors while it opened others. While some people are more open with a stranger, others relate to and engage more with somebody who shares the same cultural background. Being a stranger to people’s lives was only partially mitigated by the presence of the research assistants, who occupied an intermediate space. All of my research assistants were locals who had also experienced war. Growing up in Acholiland, they had lost families and friends, lived in camps, and still struggled to make ends meet. But they were also undeniably different. They hadn’t been to the bush, hadn’t lost out as much on educational opportunities,

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<sup>23</sup>I will talk about sampling in more detail in Chapter 2.3 starting on page 37.

and had access to a world most interviewees were shut out from, all of which was most visible in their interaction with a young white woman. But they shared a strong sense of identity as Acholi that, to my mind, overrode these differences.<sup>24</sup>

For my research, I greatly depended on the research assistants as interpreters and facilitators during and in the preparation of the interviews. Most interviewees were only proficient in the local language, Acholi, and I learned merely enough Acholi to greet people (a sometimes lengthy ritual comparable to small talk) and detect key words in conversation. The need to go back and forth, to translate my questions and the interviewee's answers, definitely affected the narrative flow, and sometimes led to questions that didn't exactly pick up on what the interviewee had said before.<sup>25</sup> Some things got lost in the interpreter's summary translation during the interview, only to resurface in the transcript, posing new questions. Sometimes, translated questions were less open, thereby pointing interviewees in a particular direction. The need for translation also affected the analysis. As the Acholi language has a comparatively small vocabulary, one word can have many different meanings, depending on tone and context (Odonga 2005: v). As a result, the same sentence could be translated with a variant wording and sometimes even with a different meaning.<sup>26</sup>

However, these limitations were clearly outweighed by the advantages of working with interpreters. Doing so allowed me to fully focus on the interviewees – their non-verbal expressions, tone, mood alterations, and interaction styles. Beyond reasons of necessity, I wouldn't have wanted to forgo my research assistants' support. Conducting research in an unfamiliar setting is not only affected by the barriers posed by language competence, but also by failure to read and understand cultural codes (Fujii 2013: 149). Language and cultural competence are closely connected: Not knowing (much of) the language the research participants speak limits participation in and understanding of people's everyday life. Language proficiency is about knowing not only the vocabulary and grammar, since understanding is not limited to what people say, but includes what they mean by

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<sup>24</sup>Considering that society is largely structured by gendered expectations, it struck me that sexual identity was, by comparison, much less important. Due to initial difficulties of finding a female research assistant, some of the interviews with women were conducted with male interpreters, but I couldn't detect a systematic difference in the interviewees' openness or in the issues addressed.

<sup>25</sup>To check how this affected the interview, a number of interviews were conducted without me by two trained research assistants (see Chapter 2.3 starting on page 37).

<sup>26</sup>To find out how much I could rely on the translations, some interviews were transcribed twice.



it (Fujii 2013: 148). Researchers are prone to miss out on meaning because they are unfamiliar with the ways in which meaning is conveyed.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, they risk overrating observations from the interviews. During my research, I encountered many situations in which I wasn't quite sure what to make of the data. When is the tolerance of domestic violence a display of virtuous agency, and when does it simply mirror what happens in society at large? Is the less affectionate way parents connect with their children a strategy of emotional disengagement in a harsh environment, or just a parenting style different from the continental European one? Is the absence of displays of emotion a protective mechanism, or a sign of lacking rapport, or is it based in a cultural pattern that discourages sharing personal sentiments? What is noise, and what is signal? Whenever I was unsure of something, I tried to check for it through the study of ethnographic literature, but also through discussions with my interpreters and informants. The same goes for questions of translation. Both I and the research assistant who handled the editing of the interviews checked all changes to the transcripts with the translators (who also assisted the research as interpreters, but didn't necessarily translate the same interviews they co-conducted), and discussed our uncertainties and questions with them. My experience was that the research assistants were more than merely facilitators. They assisted the research not just technically – by arranging interviews and translating questions and statements *in situ* – but materially, as they enabled understanding where my questions didn't make sense to the interviewees. On numerous occasions, the research assistants provided me with keys to access the interviewees' narratives and behaviour as they picked up on the cultural codes and conventions the interviewees used. In this sense, they were not just technical assistants; they became, as Fujii (2013: 151) noted, informants themselves. Where researcher and research participants don't share a common language, the interpreter is the researcher's voice, for better or worse. My impression during the interviews was that the rapport between interpreter and interviewee eased communication on numerous occasions. Sometimes, first encounters benefited from a leap of faith, since the research assistant had talked to the interviewee once before, or knew them personally.

Third party participation was not always limited to my research assistants. Visitors, mostly neighbours, regularly stopped by to say hello, to satisfy their curiosity, or to interact with the interviewee. Children often played in close prox-

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<sup>27</sup>For instance, sensitive topics such as domestic abuse and rape were often addressed in encoded terms (see also Porter 2013), and instead of asking for a tip or small bribe, gate keepers asked for a soda or a smoke, expecting to be paid some money for granting access.

imity to the interview site, and babies and toddlers were nursed during the interview. On rare occasions, another person – typically a parent – was present during the interview. We always asked interviewees to choose a venue, and checked if they were comfortable with the set-up. However, these interferences and interruptions undoubtedly impacted the interviews.

## 2.3 Sampling, data collection and analysis



Figure 2.2: Going to the field (photo by the author)

*Field research.* I conducted a preliminary field visit in November–December 2012, and three follow-up field stays in January–February 2014, July–August 2015, and January–February 2016. The research project has been reviewed and approved by the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) and facilitated by the RLP, a research institute at the School of Law, Makerere University, Kampala. Most of the data was collected in 2015 and 2016. Up through early 2018, my local research assistants and I have been in touch with the interviewees.<sup>28</sup>

*Data basis.* In preparation of the interviews with former combatants and during the data collection process, I conducted 18 expert discussions with other researchers, NGO workers, and locals with a professional background. These discussions were rather informal – mostly set up as a talk over drinks or food – and largely unstructured. Questions depended on the other person’s field of expertise or research interests. I assumed that this approach was more effective in regard to

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<sup>28</sup>A few interviewees picked up on our invitation to contact us after the interview. However, these were by and large social calls only loosely related to the research.

both turnout (most people easily agree to a chat, while a formal interview might feel more obligating) and effectiveness (some scholars feel they waste their time explaining things they have already discussed in their publications). For the same reasons of facilitating the conversation and keeping the atmosphere informal, I refrained from asking the experts to audiotape our conversation. Instead, I took notes during the talk whenever necessary, and wrote a protocol of our discussion directly afterwards. Sometimes, discussions continued via email.

Together with my research assistants, I conducted 51 interviews with former combatants. Thirty of these interviews were conducted by me with the help of one of my four research assistants (three male, one female) who also acted as translators. Twenty-one more interviews were conducted by two of my research assistants (one male, one female), who had assisted me during earlier interviews, and were trained in advance and advised during the data collection process. These interviews were also conducted to check how my identity, presence and the need for translation influenced the data.<sup>29</sup> Of these 51 interviewees, 27 were male and 24 were female. Upon the interviewee's request, two interviews were conducted mainly in English, whereas 49 interviews were conducted in Acholi only and translated for me during the interview. My (very basic) knowledge of Acholi helped me to get an understanding of the challenges involved in translating from Acholi to English, and to recognise key terms and concepts. Two more interviews were conducted with war-affected persons whom we contacted with the intention of interviewing them as former combatants but we weren't aware at that point that they didn't actually fit that criterion. Of these 53 interviews, 43 interviews (19 female, 24 male) were included in the final analysis. Ten interviews were excluded from the sample because the interview was not audiotaped (2), the interviewee turned out not to be a former combatant (2), the interviewee was unresponsive (5), or withdrew from the interview (1).

*Sampling and recruiting.* Interviewees were recruited through numerous channels: contacts provided by the reintegration centres, advocacy organisations, small NGOs, income-generating activities and personal contacts provided by the former combatants themselves, informants and the research assistants. I focused on combatants who had been with the LRA for a longer period of time (at least

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<sup>29</sup>In comparing the interviews, I found that my presence or absence did not make a systematic difference with regards to the issues people addressed and their openness to talk, but that unmediated interviews were typically shorter and contained more statements I had to make sense of with the help of my research assistants.

a year), and included as many respondents located in remote areas as possible. Initially, I relied on convenience sampling combined with snowballing. After I had conducted a number of interviews and had established contacts with different gatekeepers, I used purposive sampling to include different experiences. Table 1 (starting on page 231) provides an overview of the sample's characteristics.

As a result of using these channels (and for reasons of convenience), many interviewees were located in and around Gulu town, but we conducted an equal amount of interviews in more remote areas of Gulu district and other districts in northern Uganda, including Amuru, Alebtong, Kitgum, Lamwo, Nwoya, Lira, Oyam, and Pader district.<sup>30</sup> We left the choice of interview location to the research participants. Most interviews were conducted in or close to the interviewee's private home, but some were also conducted at their workplace or in a rather secluded public place. We excluded children born in captivity from the sample, as well as returnees who were still minors or who suffered from ongoing psychological problems (provided we had information on that). We informed all interviewees that we would be happy to link them up with an organisation that offers trauma counselling and psychological support.

*Informed consent.* Before starting the interview, we explained the reasons for our coming, introduced ourselves to the research participants, and outlined the terms of engagement. We emphasised that the interviewees were free to cancel their participation at any time, to abstain from answering any questions, and to ask us anything they might wonder about throughout. We explained that we could not offer payment, but that we would compensate them for their time and expenses, and offered to arrange (for instance, medical) support where possible. We asked for the interviewees' consent to audiotape the interviews, and abstained from recording at the interviewee's request and took extensive notes in these cases instead.

*Reciprocity in research.* As noted above, we provided the interviewees with a small compensation for transport and their time. The issue of compensation and payment for participation in research is highly debated,<sup>31</sup> but rarely addressed

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<sup>30</sup>Figure 1 on page 232 and Figure 2 on page 233 provide maps of the interviewees' home districts and sub-counties.

<sup>31</sup>At least in the social sciences – interestingly, this does not apply to experimental studies in psychology or medicine, whose participants are almost always incentivised by material rewards.

in the literature.<sup>32</sup> In the field, locals and research assistants alike complained that the practice of paying a ‘sitting allowance’, i.e., a small payment made for attending events such as NGO workshops, became so common that people started to refuse to participate or they were disappointed when none was offered.<sup>33</sup>

These concerns are legitimate, but have to be weighed against the problems involved in not offering compensation. In fact, only a handful of interviewees ever asked us for financial reimbursement.<sup>34</sup> We found that many interviewees were on their way to sell goods at the market, were offered small jobs during the interview by other members of the community (like getting water from the well), took care of their own or a neighbour’s children, or would have been working at income-generating activities if it hadn’t been for our visit. (Some even worked during the interview, mainly on small tailoring jobs or making paper beads.) Others offered us expensive soft drinks, or took a *boda-boda*<sup>35</sup> to meet us in time. They only rarely mentioned these expenses and lost opportunities to us. The rationale behind providing interviewees with a relatively generous lump sum was that I couldn’t (and didn’t want to) calculate the ‘just’ amount to be repaid, and didn’t want the interviewee’s inclination to bargain or their modesty to be the decisive factor. Moreover, another common concern – that people would invent a backstory as former combatants to be included in the study – was largely excluded through the choice of channels used for identifying former combatants. Where possible and requested, we linked them up with organisations that could support them with medical or psychosocial assistance. We informed those who were interested in the progress of the research and offered them the opportunity to ask questions at any time.

*Data collection.* The process of data collection itself was structured by the choice of research approach. There is to date no conclusive guide on how to conduct research in narrative criminology, but Sandberg (2010: 462) has outlined a few principles that guided my data collection process. These principles are largely congruent with procedures used in narrative and qualitative research (see Lucius-Hoehne 2010): First, interviews should be tape-recorded whenever possi-

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<sup>32</sup>Among the notable exceptions are Jacques and Wright (2008) and Wamai (2014).

<sup>33</sup>See also Prince (2014: 85–88), and Boesten (2008: 11) for the case of Tanzania.

<sup>34</sup>One person chose to cancel the interview, since he couldn’t agree to be interviewed without payment, arguing that we could market the information he gave us at a much higher price. In a gesture of benevolent power, he still offered to have his driver take us back to town.

<sup>35</sup>*Boda-bodas*, or motorcycle taxis, are the most convenient, fast, and (compared to taxis, which are called ‘special hires’) relatively affordable means of transport in all of Uganda.

ble to avoid loss of data. Second, the interview guide should allow for probing stories from different angles, and to follow what seems interesting. Rather than sticking too much to the interview guide, the researcher's questions should invite open answers, and prestructure the interviewee's responses as little as possible. In sum, the interview situation should support the interviewees in telling the stories they want to tell.

*Tape-recording and transcription.* As a result, the majority of the interviews were audiotaped; only two interviewees were hesitant to be recorded and asked us to take notes instead. The interviews were transcribed and translated by four Acholi research assistants, three of whom had also facilitated the research as interpreters. All of the research assistants had prior experience with interview-based research and were recommended by colleagues in the field. The transcripts were edited, anonymised and standardised by myself in tandem with my Swiss-based research assistant. Whenever we had questions on translation and meaning, we discussed these with the translators to improve both the transcript and our understanding.

*Data analysis.* As aforementioned, I had two research interests: I was keen to identify the means the LRA as an organisation commanded to commit forced combatants to violent lives, and to understand what resources the combatants' themselves had to cope with these demands of violent action and identity. To this end, all interview transcripts have been coded following the logic of grounded theory (see Charmaz 2006 for coding in grounded theory). For coding, I used *f4analyse*, a simple and light-weight program to code qualitative research data. In a first step, I defined codes based on the broad topics that came up as a result of both my research interests (as reflected in the interview guide) and the interviewees' accounts (such as initiation, everyday life, return from captivity). These broad topics later became the basis for the analytical chapters. In a second step, I refined these categories by axial coding, or sub-codes, that addressed particular aspects of the main categories or codes (for instance, friendships or religious beliefs as part of combatants' everyday lives). In a third step, I identified themes for theoretical codes (like 'finding solace in God' as a theme for the role religious beliefs play). The narrative analysis included a content analysis as a first step. In a second step, I identified passages for a more thorough narrative analysis that focused on aspects of agency and identity. Lastly, I read the interviews in their entirety to identify grand narratives.





The conflict in northern Uganda and the insurgency of the LRA have a history that spans several decades. While the emergence of the LRA can be pinpointed to the year 1986, the prelude to civil war goes way back, and there remains some element of caprice no matter which starting point one chooses. But the decision matters because it is a statement of interpretation: What or who caused the war? Who wronged whom? What grievances lie at the heart of the conflict? I would like to argue that war and violence – and any social action for that matter – start with a narrative that includes what people remember as vital parts of the story.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the conflict is inextricably linked to ethnic identities (in particular, that of the Acholi), and it starts long before the first acts of war by the LRA and even before Museveni's guerrilla army took power.

The aim of this section is not only to present a chronology of the war,<sup>2</sup> but to link history as written to history as remembered.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, I will emphasise issues the interviewees brought up in their narratives, and complete the chronology of events with their accounts. The idea is to show how people in northern Uganda relate to the struggle of the LRA without actively supporting it, thereby highlighting the complexity of political issues that lie beneath a seemingly erratic insurgency.

A number of authors have presented different chronologies of the conflict's history, which now stretches back more than 30 years. An early attempt to identify different conflict phases has been made by Gersony (1997), who looked at the dominant actors in each phase.<sup>4</sup> In his thesis, Dolan (2005) identified five

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<sup>1</sup>This is in line with the narrative approach to social reality detailed in Chapter 2.1 starting on page 15.

<sup>2</sup>Which others have done convincingly; see Atkinson (2010b), Dolan (2005), Gersony (1997).

<sup>3</sup>A similar approach has been chosen by Chris Dolan (2005).

<sup>4</sup>Namely, the Uganda People's Democratic Army (UPDA) (03/1986–07/1988), the HSM (late 1986–end 1987), Severino Lukoya (01/1988–08/1989), Early Kony (late 1987–02/1994),

phases based on the momentum of the conflict, differentiating between phases of enforced violence and phases of relative peace.<sup>5</sup> Ron Atkinson (2010) has followed Dolan's chronology, but updated it to 2010.<sup>6</sup> While these classifications are helpful and convincing, I would like to propose a slightly different chronology, focusing on the critical junctures that set a new tone and create a different reality of what it means to live with war, both inside and outside the LRA. In identifying these critical junctures, I look equally at environmental changes, internal (leadership) dynamics, and individual experiences of former combatants and war-affected civilians.

### **Ethnic politics and politicised ethnicity in colonial and post-colonial Uganda**

The conflict in northern Uganda and the emergence of the LRA cannot be understood without reference to ethnic identities. Today's Uganda is home to quite a large number of ethnic or socio-linguistic groups,<sup>7</sup> among them the Baganda in the South, Banyankole and Banyoro in the West, Iteso and Basoga in the East, and Acholi, Langi and Karamojong in the North. With close to 17 percent of Uganda's population, the Baganda are the largest ethnic group, followed by the Banyankole, who represent around 10 percent of the population (Uganda Bureau of Statistics 2016: 20). While the importance of ethnic affiliations clearly precedes colonialism,<sup>8</sup> it was British rule that made ethnic identities political on a national stage.

Uganda became a British protectorate in 1894. Prior to colonialism, political structures differed significantly between the regions, with highly centralised forms of governance in the kingdoms in the South and West of the country, and less politically stratified societies in the North and East (Omara-Otunnu 1987:

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and Current Kony/LRA (03/1994–present, considering developments up to 08/1997).

<sup>5</sup>Namely, phases I: 08/1986–05/1988, ending with the signing of the peace accord with the UPDA; II: 06/1988–03/1994, ending with the failure of direct negotiations between the Government of Uganda (GoU) and the LRA; III: 04/1994–early 12/1999; IV: late 12/1999–03/2002, ending with the signing of the peace accords between the governments of Uganda and Sudan; V: 04/2002–2004, ending with the failure of the military offensive *Operation Iron Fist*.

<sup>6</sup>With phase V lasting up to 2006, a phase VI (06/2006–early 12/2008), and a phase VII (late 12/2008–present, which at the time of the writing was May 2010). The author has argued that the latest developments would justify adding one or two more phases, or at least sub-phases (personal communication, June 2016).

<sup>7</sup>Alesina et al. (2003) found that Uganda is actually the most ethnically diverse country in the world among those with a population of 1 million or more.

<sup>8</sup>For the case of the Acholi, see Atkinson (1989, 1994).

1). These differences were, to a considerable degree, a consequence of natural constraints and possibilities. In the North, ecological conditions were harsh, with long dry seasons and unpredictable rain fall patterns. Population density was low, productive labour was focused on agriculture and livestock, and was, for the most part, subsistence economy (Atkinson 1989: 20–21, Mamdani 1976: 21). Division of labour was rudimentary, and rarely transcended the boundaries of the household. Where surpluses were generated, they were used to perform rituals of gift-giving (Atkinson 1989: 36). Shifting cultivation and herd movement in search of fertile land, water, and grass affected social organisation, as did slave raids (Mamdani 1976: 20, Mamdani 1984: 1047). Political structures were largely based on lineage and kinship, and society was organised in smaller chiefdoms with limited power and reach. In contrast, ecological conditions in the South were much more favourable. Fertile soil and more predictable and regular water supply allowed for a more settled and productive lifestyle (Mamdani 1984: 23). Surplus production led to a more complex division of labour, the creation of classes and a feudal organisation of society, in which the productive masses paid tributes to chiefs that in turn guaranteed their safety. Centralisation was both driven and facilitated by the dynamics of accumulation and tribute collection, and gave rise to the formation of kingdoms in the South. Among them, the kingdom of Buganda stood out as the largest, wealthiest and most powerful political body (Atkinson 1994: 2). Based on a mixture of pragmatic and racist considerations, the British quickly focused their interactions with the colony on Buganda. It became the hub of commercial and missionary activity, the primary recipient of infrastructural investments, and the administrative centre of Uganda (Atkinson 1994: 2–4). While these processes were largely structured by the colonial power, it was powerful Bugandan chiefs who facilitated the colonial project as much as they profited from it. In this arrangement of intermediary rule (*intermediäre Herrschaft*; von Trotha 1994a), the colonial government vitally depended on the cooperation of local intermediaries to enforce its claim to power. Buganda was quick to realise that the interaction with the colonial power could be to their advantage, and actively engaged in strategies of *extraversion*<sup>9</sup> to confirm and stabilise its hold on power and access to economic resources. Buganda's political and economic strength also served as a rationale for the British administration to keep the South demilitarised, and to recruit people from the North and East

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<sup>9</sup>Originally a psychological concept, Bayart (2000) has suggested using the term 'extraversion' to describe relationships of exploitation and dependency between Africa and Europe (and Asia), in which the African leaders "mobiliz[e] resources derived from their (possibly unequal) relationship with the external environment" (Bayart 2000: 218).

into the army (Tripp 2010: 42). By employing Southerners (mostly Baganda) in agriculture and civil service, and people from the northern and eastern region (Langi, Acholi, and Iteso) in security positions, the British effectively divided economic and military power along tribal lines (Dolan 2005: 70–71).

Under colonial rule, the Buganda kingdom became even more powerful. When Uganda became independent in 1962, colonialism's legacy was one of more pronounced differences between the regions it had created and, at that point, an irreversible imbalance of power. The first constitution, drafted in London right before independence, reflected this power structure by giving autonomous status with greater rights and privileges to Buganda, and quasi-autonomous status to the other kingdoms (Tripp 2010: 44). This cemented the political and economic dominance of Buganda, an inequality which proved to be one of the greatest challenges for all post-colonial governments (Tripp 2010: 42).

On 9 October 1962, Uganda became an independent republic. As Kasozi (1994: 59) noted, “[t]his transfer of power marked the only peaceful change of government in Uganda's history as an independent nation”. The government was based on an alliance between the Bagandan *Kabaka Yekka* party and the Uganda People's Congress (UPC), a multi-party union led by Milton Obote. Power was handed over to Milton Obote, who became the first prime minister. A year later, the Bugandan *Kabaza* (King) Mutesa II was installed as the first president and commander-in-chief of the armed forces. The first government was endowed with little political experience and did not have much of a political agenda for the independent nation (Kasozi 1994: 59–61). As a consequence, politics were largely structured by ethnic affiliations and power interests. While Obote acknowledged the kingdoms, he soon sought to diminish the influence of Buganda by removing Baganda from influential positions in civil service (Kasozi 1994: 74). This approach quickly backfired, and was met with nationalist resistance in Buganda (Tripp 2010: 43). The struggle over control resulted in the exile of King Mutesa II, and led to the constitutional crisis of 1966. On 2 March 1966, Obote suspended the offices of the president and vice president, thereby assuming the full executive power of the state (Kasozi 1994: 84). Only six weeks later, a new constitution that established a unitary and highly centralised state was single-handedly pushed through by Obote, who went on to make himself president without elections (Tripp 2010: 45). Under the new constitution, the military assumed an even stronger role. In the military, Idi Amin, by then deputy commander of the armed forces, replaced many of the Langi and Acholi soldiers with people from

West Nile, Amin's home region. Obote realised too late that Amin was building up to challenge his grip on power. He was ousted in January 1971 in a military coup staged while he was abroad.

While Northerners and the military dominated politics under both Obote and Amin, regime change resulted in new divisions within the North. Amin's take-over and an unsuccessful coup attempt against him led to the widespread killing and torturing of Langi and Acholi soldiers and West Nile officers who had been loyal to Obote (Kasozi 1994: 111–112). Amin in turn replenished the military ranks with Nubi and Kakwa from the North, Amin's own group, and mercenaries from southern Sudan. Without much of a political program beyond the retention of power, his term in office was characterised by mass violence against civilians, the close surveillance, torture and killing of any opponents, and the destruction of the economy. By 1978, there wasn't much support left either in the populace or in the army, and mutinies and violent insurgencies preceded the escalation of power struggles in the military. Many members of the opposition sought refuge in neighbouring Tanzania, where they formed a number of armed groups to fight Amin's regime. When the conflict spilled over into Tanzania, the Tanzanians joined forces with the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA), a merger of 28 Ugandan exile groups opposing Amin's government. Among them was an old acquaintance, former president Obote, who supported the fight with his militia *Kikosi Maalum*. When Obote was reinstated in 1980 with the help of the Tanzanian forces, the military became dominated by Langi and Acholi soldiers again. Since Obote was afraid that one of his officers might once again become too powerful, promotions were based on loyalty rather than experience. This strategy aggravated many officers, including the Acholi Tito Okello and Bazilio Okello, and led them to stage a coup against Obote in 1985.

Up to this point, all post-colonial regimes had been more about the acquisition of power than its exercise. During independence, state politics had been successively militarised, a development that started with Obote's first term (1966–71) and culminated in the regime of Idi Amin. The NRA emerged in 1981 out of frustration over the 1980 elections, which fell short of their democratic objectives. Tanzania, which had protected Obote and, in fact, had helped him to get back into power, certainly didn't want to see Amin get replaced by yet another undemocratic and illegitimate government. The problem was that the UPC had already seized political power, but was unlikely to be confirmed in free and fair elections (Kasozi 1994: 136–137). The election campaign was characterised by

the at times violent intimidation of the opposition, the election itself was fraught with irregularities, and the results were too obviously manipulated to produce the desired outcome. Yoweri Museveni, who had been a member of the intelligence service under Obote's first government, had joined Obote in Tanzanian exile. As the leader of the Front for National Salvation (FRONASA), he fought alongside Obote's militia *Kikosi Maalum* against Amin's regime (Kasozi 1994: 124). After the 1980 elections, he formed the Popular Resistance Army (PRA) and staged an unsuccessful coup attempt against Obote's second government. In 1981, the PRA merged with other opposition groups and formed the NRA and its political wing, the NRM. They continued their struggle after Tito Okello's take-over, arguing that the new government had left unchanged the dysfunctional and destructive organisation of the state and the armed forces (Kasozi 1994: 174, Mutibwa 1992: 169–170). Effectively violating a peace accord that the NRA had signed with the Okello government in mid-December 1985, Museveni's forces overthrew Okello in January 1986.

On 29 January 1986, Museveni took power. In his inauguration speech, he emphasised that

No one should think that what is happening today is a mere change of guard: it is a fundamental change in the politics of our country. In Africa, we have seen so many changes that change, as such, is nothing short of mere turmoil. We have had one group getting rid of another one, only for it to turn out to be worse than the group it displaced. Please do not count us in that group of people. (Museveni 1992: 21)

Museveni sharply criticised the influence of the military in state affairs and the sectarian tendencies in both the army and the state. His coming to power was welcomed by many civilians and international observers (Tripp 2010: 1–2, Omara-Otunnu 1992: 446–447). At least in the beginning, it appeared that Museveni was more committed to the anti-sectarian project than his predecessors had been. His promise to create a 'broad-based government' was supported by his actions: The new government passed an amnesty law that included all police, state security and military personnel, incorporated members of other armed groups into the army, and invited representatives of other political factions into the government (Tripp 2010: 48–49). But Museveni's ambitions to create a broad-based government were quickly overwhelmed by the challenges of maintaining his grip on power. While the first cabinet represented a wide range of different societal groups, soon assignments in the government and military were being given to a

more narrowly defined group that clearly favoured ethnic groups from the South and the West, and reserved many key positions for Banyankole, Museveni's own group (Lindemann 2011: 395–396). People from the East and especially from the North were greatly under-represented at all administrative levels, and virtually excluded from all positions of influence.<sup>10</sup>

In sum, Museveni did not succeed in freeing state and military politics of their sectarian tendencies, though he shaped them to suit his needs. He both de-ethnicised politics on a local level, forging a Bantu identity shared by those from western and central Uganda, and re-ethnicised politics by emphasising ethnic and regional identity on a national level (Atkinson 2010b: 279–280). This move was meant to create unity among the ethnic groups participating in power – smoothing over the differences between Baganda and Banyankole – by emphasising the contrast to the non-Bantu ethnic groups.

### **Marginalisation and spiritual renewal: Resistance movements in northern Uganda, 1986–1988**

Museveni's take-over had such an impact in northern Uganda because it gave rise to both an internal and an external crisis in Acholiland (Branch 2010). Internally, Acholi society suffered from a breakdown of traditional authority. The lineage-based and gerontocratic leadership had lost its legitimacy, and this crisis was only aggravated by the return home of the defeated UNLA soldiers, who were unwilling to bow to the authority of the elders (Branch 2010: 26–31). Externally, Museveni's take-over cut the cord that linked the ethnic groups in the North to power in the national state. For the people in northern Uganda, Museveni's seizure of power was not about promoting democracy, but, by removing a government dominated by Northerners, about forcing a war between the North and the South (Finnström 2008: 74). For them, the period right after Museveni's take-over didn't represent the hope for lasting peace, but rather was "a strange time of holding one's breath while preparing for the worst" (Dolan 2005: 72).

As it turned out, they were right to be concerned. The strategy of the NRA in the North was rather one "of breaking their backs than of winning over the people's hearts" (*Weekly Topic*, 1 April 1987, as cited in Omara-Otunnu 1992: 453). Expecting to fight an armed rebellion in Acholiland, the NRA "launched

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<sup>10</sup>Apart from some cases of window-dressing; see Lindemann (2011: 401–404).

a counterinsurgency without an insurgency” (Branch 2007: 146). In the process, NRA soldiers committed gross human rights violations against civilians that were justified as both pre-emptive and retaliatory action against the UNLA soldiers. There are countless reports of stolen cattle, male-on-male rape, illegal detentions and the intentional spoiling of food (Amnesty International 1991). These violations were remembered vividly by many research participants, who complained that NRA soldiers were “taking their crap in the flour that is meant for human consumption” (Patience, l. 611; see also Sarah, ll. 329–330).<sup>11</sup> Both as a result of and parallel to these dynamics, a large number of armed groups that countered the NRA’s violence and questioned Museveni’s reclamation of power emerged.<sup>12</sup> The most important armed actors became the UPDA, the HSM, and the LRA.

The UPDA and its political wing, the Uganda People’s Democratic Movement (UPDM), were established in Juba around March 1986. The force consisted mainly of former UNLA soldiers who, after their defeat by the NRA, had retreated into Sudan or returned to their home villages in northern Uganda (Gersony 1997: 20). They were joined by young men living in these villages who hadn’t yet been involved in the conflict. Not least because they protected them from the NRA’s abuse, the UPDA enjoyed widespread support by the civilian population, who in turn provided them with food and intelligence. The group launched a number of successful attacks against the NRA, and although it didn’t succeed in capturing any of the towns or trading centres, it controlled large parts of the countryside (Gersony 1997: 23). The NRA responded to these attacks with brutal violence against the civilian population. By late 1986, the UPDA had lost support and military strength, and struggled with fading morale after an unsuccessful military operation (Atkinson 2010b: 287).

The vacuum that the UPDA left was quickly filled by the HSM. The HSM was founded and led by Alice Auma, a young woman who had previously been a member of the UPDM. Auma claimed to be possessed by a spirit named Lakwena, the ‘messenger’,<sup>13</sup> who instructed her to fight the newly established Ugandan government and to bring lasting peace to Uganda. What set her apart from the

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<sup>11</sup>In 1987, Museveni himself admitted to the systematic destruction in Acholiland; see Omara-Otunnu (1992: 455).

<sup>12</sup>An Amnesty Commission report identified 22 armed groups that had resisted Museveni’s take-over; see Hovil and Lomo (2005: 6).

<sup>13</sup>In Acholi, *lakwenna* stands for ‘messenger’ or ‘apostle’; Auma hence became known as Alice Lakwena. To keep confusion at bay, I will refer to the person as Alice Auma and to the spirit as Lakwena.



UPDA was that she aspired to solve not only the external but the internal crisis in Acholiland. Her message was one of universal peace, and by integrating religious and spiritual elements that transcended ethnic divisions and localised practices, it appealed to a wide array of people even beyond Acholiland (Omara-Otunnu 1992: 455).<sup>14</sup> While she and her following didn't have much in the way of military expertise,<sup>15</sup> let alone equipment to wage war against Museveni's forces, their commitment to the cause made up for what they lacked in manpower, at least in the beginning. It seems to have been that drive and fearlessness (which was also ritually enforced by Auma) that secured the movement some surprising victories against the otherwise superior forces of the NRA. Outside Acholiland, the movement lacked the at least passive support of the local populations. The movement was ultimately defeated in October 1987 in a decisive battle in the swamps of Iganga, a place not far from Jinja town and approximately fifty miles from Kampala. After the defeat, Auma fled the country and escaped to Kenya, where she died in 2007.<sup>16</sup>

Concurrent with the rise of the HSM emerged another spirit-guided movement, the LRA, under the guidance of Joseph Kony.<sup>17</sup> In the beginning, the LRA was characterised by the same elements of spirit possession and Christianity as the HSM. Like Alice Auma, Joseph Kony claimed to be possessed by the spirit of Lakwena, which instructed him to take up arms against Museveni and fight for a better, renewed and devout society. It was backed by the LRM, the political arm of the LRA with members mostly in the British diaspora.

Much noise has been made about the HSM and the LRA as spiritual movements, often portraying northern Ugandans as a superstitious and primitive people unable to cope with social change in a modern, democratic manner. This interpretation served the new leadership in Kampala well, and was actively supported by it (see for instance Atkinson 2010b: 288–289, Dolan 2009: 238–241,

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<sup>14</sup>Some authors have argued that this Christian universalism was a deliberate strategy to attract as large a following as possible (see for instance Allen 1991: 395, Omara-Otunnu 1992: 455).

<sup>15</sup>Though some high-ranking military men joined the movement, including Colonel John Kennedy Kilama, a former battalion commander in the army (Omara-Otunnu 1992: 459).

<sup>16</sup>The history of the HSM (and its predecessor, the Holy Spirit Mobile Forces) and Alice Auma can only be treated in passing here; for further reference, see Allen (1991), Behrend (1999), Omara-Otunnu (1992).

<sup>17</sup>In its early days, the LRA called itself – in line with its self-understanding as the successor to the HSM – *Holy Spirit Movement II*, then quickly and briefly became the *United Democratic Christian Army* and the *Lord's Salvation Army* before permanently settling on the name *Lord's Resistance Army* (Dolan 2005: 74, Vinci 2005: 366).

Finnström 2013: 114, Omara-Otunnu 1992: 457–458). By extension, it labelled all Acholi claims as illegitimate and irrational, thereby distracting from the political problems at the heart of the conflict. Moreover, it made it possible to uphold the image of Uganda as an African success story that both the government and the international community were invested in. It also sat comfortably with Western discourses about the tribal nature of African politics at large. Whatever the concrete nature of the HSM's religio-political vision, one shouldn't read too much into it. It suffices to say that in a situation of existential insecurity and political impotence, Auma's message struck a nerve among her fellow northern Ugandans:<sup>18</sup>

Lakwena was merely a vehicle through which social discontent in the North of Uganda found expression. She was able to gain tenacious followers who were prepared to risk their lives against all odds because a cross-section of marginalised inhabitants recognised her as a symbol of both their plight and aspirations. (Omara-Otunnu 1992: 458)

During Museveni's time in office, the de-legitimation of northern Ugandans' claims to power became a constant in the relationship between the North and the government in Kampala. The conflict did not just mirror and deepen ethnic cleavages; it also created "essentially two separate countries: a mostly peaceful and relatively prosperous south [...] and a war-torn, impoverished, isolated north" (Atkinson 2010b: 284). This perception was also echoed by the interviewees:

If you look closely at the way we are treated in northern Uganda, western Uganda and eastern Uganda, there is a difference. [...] I also remember during the time when I was still in captivity, Kony said he would not have started this rebellion but what made him get into it was the regional differences. The Acholi are discriminated against by other tribes. That was the reason why he decided to start this rebellion, so that he can become president, leading on this side of Gulu. Museveni would lead the other side of Kampala and beyond, because

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<sup>18</sup>A similar judgement has been voiced by Tim Allen (1991: 396): "In a situation in which structures articulating former orthodoxies have crumbled, and the state has been unable to replace them with effective administrative and legal institutions, spirit possession has been crucially important in negotiations with the realm beyond moral intercourse, and with establishing a degree of social accountability. [...] In a world turned upside down, where society is perpetually being unconsciously and consciously reinvented, where witchcraft and sorcery are widely believed to be the most common cause of mortality, where the sphere beyond moral interaction is a frightening aspect of daily life, spirit possession has helped make some sense of the confusion."

of these differences that have separated us. The way I also see it, there is inequality on many issues including the roads, hospitals, and environment. I travelled through Masaka<sup>19</sup> and beyond and realised there is a big difference. (Faith, ll. 1156–1181)

While the NRA's offensive in the North was, in the beginning, based on an "imagined insurgency" (Branch 2007: 148), armed rebellion soon became a self-fulfilling prophecy, with a confusingly large number of actors engaged in warfare. With the end of Museveni's bush war, civil war had not in fact ended, but had shifted northwards (Finnström 2008: 69). As usual, it was the civilian population who had to bear the brunt. The NRA met the uprising with brute force, and often pre-emptive or retaliatory action directed against civilians. During the first years of the conflict, the lines weren't nearly as clear as they appear today: "Back then, people were not running away from the LRA soldiers, they were running away from the government troops" (George, ll. 608–610). In fact, all major forces engaged in massive looting, killing, and burning (Dolan 2005: 74).

### **Fighting back and fading support, early to mid 1990**

In May 1988, the UPDA signed a peace accord with the Ugandan government. Its members either demobilised, or joined one of the remaining forces: the government forces or the LRA. By 1989, the LRA had become the only viable group opposing the Ugandan government. On both sides, violence against civilians continued throughout 1989 and 1990. In April 1991, the government launched *Operation North*, a counterinsurgency campaign that would last for four months. Planned as a mass screening operation in search of armed combatants and intelligence, the operation resulted in large-scale human rights violations by the NRA: looting, arrests and detentions, rape, torture, and killings (Atkinson 2010b: 290). In addition to this search-and-destroy mission, *Operation North* included the creation of so-called 'arrow groups': groups of young men armed with spears and arrows, machetes, or sticks and mobilised to support the fight against the LRA. As the fights intensified, the NRA decided that the arrow groups should handle the LRA on their own; a decision that subjected the civilian population to violent retaliation by the LRA. This was also the time when the LRA started to systematically maim people by cutting off their lips, ears, hands, and legs. The LRA's

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<sup>19</sup>Masaka is a large town with more than 100'000 inhabitants located in the Central Region of Uganda, approximately 140 kilometres South-West of Kampala.

violence and the NRA's passivity sent two messages to the civilian population: one, that they shouldn't cooperate with the government forces, and two, that they couldn't count on the government's protection if they did.

After these violent excesses, between 1992 and 1993, the violence decreased. Betty Atuku Bigombe, by then Minister of Pacification of the North, initiated meetings between representatives of the Ugandan government and the LRA that led to the 1994 Peace Talks. However, the negotiations came to a sudden halt when Museveni set an ultimatum for the fighters to come out of the bush within seven days. The abrupt ending of the Peace Talks was rumoured to be a consequence of the Sudanese involvement (Atkinson 2010a: 206–207). In fact, around that time, contact between the Sudanese government and the LRA was established, though it remains unclear whether this contact preceded or followed the collapse of the peace process (Atkinson 2010b: 295). After that, violence spiked again, and northern Uganda became the site of a number of large-scale massacres with several hundred victims, including the Atiak massacre in April 1995, the attacks on the Karuma and Acholpi refugee camps in March and July 1996, the abduction of 139 girls from a boarding school in Aboke in October 1996, and the Lokung-Palabek massacre in January 1997 (Gersony 1997: 103–107).<sup>20</sup> During that time, people started to commute at night to places they considered safer – towns, hospitals, churches – and returned to their homes and workplaces in the morning.<sup>21</sup>

### **Sudanese exile, proxy war and displacement, 1996–2002**

In 1995, Uganda adopted a new constitution that limited the president to two five-year terms in office. Effectively ignoring the two terms in office he had served before, Museveni got elected for a first term under the new constitution in May 1996 (Dolan 2009: 46). He entered his third term in office<sup>22</sup> with the campaign promise to defeat the LRA militarily. With the promulgation of the 1995 Constitution of Uganda, the NRA became the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF).

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<sup>20</sup>For further reference, see Bagenda and Hovil (2003), Komakec and Schulz (2012), Owor Ogora et al. (2007), Temmerman (2001).

<sup>21</sup>On the practice of 'night commuting', see Allen and Schomerus (2006), Baines and Paddon (2012), Falk et al. (2004).

<sup>22</sup>Against common convention, I will not follow this creative counting; i.e., from 2016 to 2021, Museveni is serving his seventh term in office and not, as is often stated, his fifth term.

Meanwhile, the LRA had entered an alliance with the Sudanese government that would soon prove to be consequential. After the Peace Talks of 1994 failed, the Sudanese government started to support the LRA, both materially (with artillery and provisions) and with military bases on their territory. The conflict quickly escalated to a proxy war between the governments of Uganda and Sudan, with Uganda supporting the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), a guerrilla movement that was fighting for a secular and unified Sudanese state,<sup>23</sup> and Sudan supporting the LRA to fight the SPLA, thereby countering Uganda's involvement in the conflict.

This support has led some observers to portray the LRA as warlords for whom waging war had become a career choice, that is, a way of making a living by spreading terror, controlling territory and looting from civilians. But the alliance with the Sudanese government was always a pragmatic move rather than the result of a deliberate decision to exchange political for economic goals (Dolan 2009: 82–83). Even under Sudanese protection, the LRA tried to remain as self-reliant as possible, for instance, by cultivating gardens. Many former combatants described life in Sudan as relatively peaceful, prosperous, and structured by everyday routines and chores, “like at home” (Sarah, ll. 168; Elisabeth, ll. 968). Sudanese support helped the LRA to meet the UPDF eye-to-eye, by providing superior equipment and training. Under Sudanese sponsorship, the LRA was even better equipped than the UPDF (Schomerus 2007: 41). While most combatants' training was limited to learning how to dismantle and reassemble a gun and getting used to walking long distances, Sudanese exile also meant extensive military training for some of them. From their Sudanese bases, the LRA dispersed troops and launched attacks in Uganda.

In September 1996 and as part of the military offensive against the LRA, the Ugandan government started to resettle the northern Ugandan population in so-called ‘protected villages’. Where most people had lived in scattered villages before, they were now forced to relocate to former towns and trading centres whose population now ranged from a few thousand to tens of thousands of inhabitants (Dolan 2005: 78). The government made it clear that their relocation was mandatory; whoever stayed in the villages was considered to be in support of or part of the LRA. At the height of the conflict, about 80 percent (more than 1.5

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<sup>23</sup>Today, the SPLA is the army of the Republic of South Sudan, which has been independent since 2011.

million people) of the population of the war affected parts of northern Uganda were displaced (Allen and Schomerus 2006: 70). One of the biggest issues with the 'protected villages' was that they were often anything but protected, but instead left people vulnerable to attacks by the LRA. Since the barracks of the UPDF were located in the middle of the settlements, civilians often protected the military rather than the other way around, creating 'protected barracks' instead (Dolan 2005: 165). One former combatant angrily described the situation:

In the camps people lived all over the place, even at the outskirts, while the government troops lived in the middle of the camp. They would have posts of soldiers like one here, three right over there and two on this side. Those posts were where they thought the LRA would enter at. In the middle of the night, when the rebels started firing guns at them, they ran away. They would run to the barracks. The civilians would be left alone sleeping. [...] It is the reason people were killed even in camps. The rebels burnt huts in many numbers, in order to access the government troops who were hiding in the middle of the camps. (John, ll. 745–764)

So-called 'local defence units' or 'home guards' – who were often poorly trained, forcibly recruited and not exactly highly committed – had to compensate for the lack of military personnel (Dolan 2005: 218–219). Moreover, civilian compliance with UPDF demands for resettlement and their deployment as military accessories further angered the LRA, who felt betrayed by what they saw as cooperation with the enemy. Moreover, the camps were considered 'easy' (i.e. badly protected) and lucrative targets, both for abducting new people and for looting food delivered by relief agencies.

Not only did the government do a bad job protecting civilians in the camps, they also made them prisoners. The camp populations were severely limited both in their movements and activities, and in their possibilities for earning a living. Curfew meant that civilians couldn't move too far from the camps to cultivate their gardens. Apart from the sanctions imposed by the UPDF and the risk of running into LRA units, movement was further restricted by land mines planted by one side or the other (Dolan 2009: 120). In most cases, people couldn't cultivate enough to feed themselves, and were highly reliant on often unpredictable food deliveries. While some created surpluses and sold them in town, often times, trade was not primarily motivated by excess production, but rather by the exchange of goods for cash-bound commodities like soap, medication, or dowry

payments (Dolan 2009: 117–118). Life in the camps debilitated people by making them dependent on aid and keeping them from earning an income, and by subjecting them to inhumane living conditions. The crowded living arrangements, lack of sanitary facilities, and malnutrition led to the spread of diseases like HIV and Ebola (Dolan 2009: 162–164). Camp life also broke with many traditions that were vital for the cultural identity of the Acholi people, like storytelling, funerals and burials, marriages, and dances. The cramped living conditions, lack of privacy, and exposure of children and adolescents to the sexual activities of their parents gave rise to what interviewees have described as moral decay: a high prevalence of prostitution, early sexual relationships, and pregnancies without proper courtship and marriage (Dolan 2009: 170–171). These dynamics were also described by some of the interviewees:

In the camps, mothers, children and fathers to the children all slept in one house or room. You would sleep with your eldest daughter in the same room and probably if your husband returns drunk at night, he would come asking for sex. Your eldest daughter would be in the room listening to whatever would be happening. The girl then decides to leave the home and go find a husband. And it's the reason many of the young girls gave birth to children while they were in camps. (Janet, ll. 1431–1443)

The failure to keep up with gender-specific expectations led to high rates of suicide, domestic violence and substance abuse, especially among men. Women, in turn, were often left alone with the responsibility for taking care of the family.

In sum, lacking overall commitment and resources made the camps sites of the abuse of civilians rather than of their protection (Dolan 2009: 151). Dolan (2009) has made a compelling case that the large-scale and long-term resettlement wasn't a military strategy, but a manifestation of social torture meant to put the people in northern Uganda 'in their place', to punish and make them bow down to the government in the South. The government actions and inaction didn't do much to discourage the suspicion that the camps weren't meant to protect civilians, but to penalise them and keep them from supporting the LRA (Dolan 2009: 109).

By that time, there was a lot of international involvement through humanitarian and relief agencies. While international political bodies shied away from confronting the issue politically, relief agencies stepped in. By 1997, Gulu Sup-

port the Children Organisation (GUSCO)<sup>24</sup>, an NGO operating in Gulu, had founded a reception centre for returning combatants.

Although Museveni refused to talk to the LRA, discussions with other actors intensified. Different societal groups campaigned for a non-military solution to the conflict, which resulted in the passing of the Amnesty Act in late 1999. The Amnesty Act provided a blanket amnesty not just for members of the LRA, but for “any Ugandan who has at any time since the 26th day of January, 1986, engaged in or is engaging in war or armed rebellion against the government of the Republic of Uganda” (Government of Uganda 2000). In late 1999, the governments of Sudan and Uganda reached an agreement to cease supporting each other's non-state armed groups. While the so-called Nairobi agreement didn't create binding force (Khartoum continued to provide the LRA with ammunition and food), it certainly antagonised the LRA, which was excluded from negotiations that were basically about them. At the same time, the relationship between Khartoum and the LRA deteriorated because the LRA had started to attack civilian settlements close to their bases, and it then turned sour when the Sudanese government requested that the LRA relocate a thousand kilometres northwards on short notice (Dolan 2009: 83).<sup>25</sup> The LRA retaliated for Uganda's involvement in Sudanese politics quickly; within two weeks, they re-entered Uganda from Sudan. Civilians who had begun to leave the camps were forced back into them around January 2000. With conflicting statements going back and forth about the LRA's impending defeat and civilians' return into the camps, the government subjected civilians to an unnecessarily insecure and vulnerable situation, as one interviewee lamented:

The government even goes ahead to share information on all media platforms that the rebels are already powerless and the civilians start to become relaxed about the war. Thereafter you hear that forty people have been abducted at a certain place. The rebels do this to avenge. The government should be made responsible for that. If the government was telling the people to be aware that the rebels are still strong, and that people should limit their movement, people wouldn't

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<sup>24</sup>GUSCO is a community based NGO located in Gulu, and one of the longest-standing actors in northern Uganda that has been operational (with interruptions) up to today. Funding comes from different donors; for instance, the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) which helped GUSCO to set up the first reception centre in 1997 and UNICEF (Allen and Schomerus 2006: 77).

<sup>25</sup>Namely, from Nisitu, a market ten kilometres south of Juba, to Jebelein, which today is just across the South Sudanese border, on Sudanese territory, 350 kilometres south of Khartoum.



have been abducted in large numbers like it happened. (John, ll. 2366–2379)

Against these persistent insecurities, a ‘decongestion plan’ to resettle people from the camps in an area within their parish of origin (not necessarily their home parish) was set in motion in November 2000. Rather than allowing people to go home, this effectively meant splitting camps into smaller units.

In March 2001, Museveni was re-elected for a fourth term. Election results showed a clear divide between the regions most affected by the war and the rest of the country: In the former districts of Gulu, Kitgum and Pader (the heart of Acholiland), Museveni was supported by only 13.7 percent of the electorate, whereas he won 71.7 percent of the votes in the rest of the country.<sup>26</sup> Clearly, war further divided the country politically into those affected by and those spared from it.

### **Renewed attacks, retaliation and shifting alliances, 2002–2006**

The situation took a new turn in December 2001, when the US Department of State classified the LRA as a terrorist organisation in response to the 9/11 attacks (Reeker 2001). This decision was based on the LRA’s link to Khartoum, which had at some point been home to al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. Khartoum, though admitting that there had been an arrangement in the past, was eager to deny continued support for the LRA (International Crisis Group 2004: 7). While the Sudanese government does seem to have stopped supplying the LRA with ammunition and food at some point, this hiatus was rather short-lived. But more importantly, it gave way to negotiations between the governments of Sudan and Uganda on joint action against the LRA.

Ugandan troops had been unofficially deployed in Sudan throughout the 1990s, with regular sightings from 1996 onwards (Schomerus 2012b: 128). From 1995, UPDF and SPLA forces had been cooperating by sharing intelligence and providing material support to each other. Sudan, in turn, fought a proxy war with Uganda by supporting the LRA to fight the SPLA. But with the LRA being listed

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<sup>26</sup>The last figure includes poor results in the neighbouring Langi districts of Apac and Lira (21.8 and 19.9 percent respectively). My own calculations are based on the official election results published by The Electoral Commission (2001).

as a terrorist organisation, priorities changed and forced Sudan to withdraw from their engagement with the LRA. In early 2002, the governments of Uganda and Sudan reached an agreement that allowed the UPDF to launch attacks on LRA bases within Sudan. *Operation Iron Fist* was started in March 2002. It came with the mass deployment of 10'000 soldiers – and high casualties on both sides: “seen from northern Uganda the only signs of military activity were trucks carrying live soldiers northwards and corpses southwards” (Dolan 2005: 89). Despite the enormous efforts, the operation did not succeed in capturing Kony, but instead pushed the LRA back into Uganda, extending its area of operation beyond Acholiland into the regions of Lango and Teso (Lomo and Hovil 2004: 6). In 2003, the conflict shifted into eastern Uganda, up to Soroti and Katakwi (Dolan 2005: 91), and the advance was accompanied by a spike in abductions and the re-emergence of night commuting. As a response and with support from Ugandan government troops, a number of defence units – also referred to as home guards – emerged inside and outside the camps, including the Amuka in Teso, the Rhino Boys in Lira and Soroti, the Frontier Guards in Kitgum, and the Arrow Boys in South(ern) Sudan (Dolan 2005: 92, Koos 2014, Lomo and Hovil 2004). Their creation and support by the Ugandan government further antagonised the LRA, and helped to blur the lines between combatants and civilians.

But there were also important changes in the legal dimension of the conflict that contributed to its continuation. In March 2002, Uganda passed the Anti-Terrorism Act, which, while making no reference to the Amnesty Act, basically negated it and was perceived as an exclusion of senior LRA members from the Amnesty Act (Dolan 2009: 53). In December 2003, Museveni decided to refer the case to the newly established International Criminal Court (ICC). The referral and its timing were widely criticised as undermining an ongoing process of conflict resolution; the RLP,<sup>27</sup> for instance, commented that the referral “did not reflect an honest desire to meet international obligations under the Statute, but was a trump card to reassert democratic credentials at the international level” (Refugee Law Project 2004: 5). In October 2005, the ICC issued arrest warrants for the LRA leadership, namely, Joseph Kony, Otti Vincent, Okot Odhiambo, Dominic Ongwen and Raska Lukwiya. The initial indictments listed 33 crimes, including 21 counts of war crimes and 12 counts of crimes against humanity.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>The RLP is a research institute belonging to the School of Law at the Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, and that also supported this research project.

<sup>28</sup>While Dominic Ongwen was initially charged with the lowest number of counts, namely seven, the pre-trial hearings resulted in the confirmation of 70 charges against him (International

### Ceasefire and negotiations: The Juba Peace Talks, 2006–2008

The presidential elections of February 2006 confirmed Museveni in office for a fifth term. Again, the results showed a clear rejection of Museveni in the North, where he received a total of 15.9 percent of the valid votes in the districts of Gulu, Kitgum, and Pader,<sup>29</sup> and 61.0 percent in the rest of the country.<sup>30</sup> What becomes apparent in the results is that the voting in the 2006 elections happened along political rather than ethnic lines (Tripp 2010: 40). Around the same time, most probably in late 2005 or early 2006, the Sudanese government stopped supporting the LRA (Schomerus 2007: 25). The end of the Sudanese civil war and the creation of the semi-autonomous Government of South Sudan (GoSS) gave way to negotiations between the latter and the LRA. Although the LRA had lost Sudanese military support, the South Sudanese acknowledged their cause and the Ugandan government's lack of commitment to a peaceful solution. By February 2006, they had agreed on the GoSS's role as mediator in negotiations between the LRA and the GoU, and on the cessation of hostilities on South Sudanese territory (Atkinson 2010a: 210).

The negotiations got off to a slow start, not least because the GoU's commitment to the talks seemed questionable, with announcements and actions going back and forth between dialogue and military action (Atkinson 2010a: 213–214). The talks that became known as the Juba Peace Talks formally started on 14 July 2006.<sup>31</sup> The two parties quickly agreed on five agenda items: (1) the cessation of hostilities, (2) comprehensive political solutions, (3) justice and accountability, (4) demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration, and (5) permanent ceasefire (Schomerus 2012a: 94). The LRA's opening demand was ceasefire, a claim that was quickly rejected by the Ugandan government. On 12 August, Raska Lukwiya, for whom the ICC had issued a arrest warrant, was killed in battle, which put another damper on the negotiations. Quite surprisingly, the delegations adopted

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Criminal Court 2016a). On the process and its perception in northern Uganda and among former combatants, see Chapter 4.7 starting on page 178.

<sup>29</sup>He also performed poorly (<20 percent) in the northern districts of Lira and Apac, and in the war-affected eastern districts of Soroti, Amuria, and Kabermaido.

<sup>30</sup>Looking at the official election results, which have only been published in a 221 page document as detailed results by polling station and with little data aggregation, one cannot help but think that this format is intentional, an effort to drown potential analysts in data.

<sup>31</sup>I will give only a very short summary of the Juba Peace Talks; a comprehensive account is Schomerus (2012a).

a Cessation of Hostilities (CoH) agreement only two weeks later. In this early stage, another important source of conflict had already become apparent, namely, the outstanding ICC warrants. While the Ugandan government went on to offer amnesty to the top commanders (including Kony), the ICC insisted on the legal force of the warrants. Repeated violations (or allegations thereof) of the CoH agreement became important stumbling blocks over the next months. While such allegations were made against both sides, breaches by the UPDF seem to have been more frequent and serious (Atkinson 2010a: 215). As a result of the difficulties arising in its implementation, the CoH was amended in November, and extended in December until the end of February 2007.

In late February, the LRA rejected the renewal of the ceasefire agreement that was about to expire. By the end of 2006, having lost trust and confidence in the GoSS's capacity to provide effective and impartial mediation (Atkinson 2010a: 217), the LRA rejected the involvement of the GoSS and of vice president and chief mediator Riek Machar in any further talks and Juba as the space for negotiations. A series of negotiations followed, and the talks were resumed in May 2007. Shortly after that, the parties signed Agenda Item 2 on comprehensive solutions that addressed questions like the integration of LRA members into the army, the dissolution of the camps, and programs for post-war recovery (Atkinson 2010b: 312). Only eight weeks later, on 29 June 2007, they agreed on Agenda Item 3, which dealt with questions of accountability and reconciliation. But rumours about parallel negotiations without the LRA's involvement and cash-outs paid to LRA members fuelled their delegation's mistrust (Schomerus 2012a: 170–179). The suspicions led to the execution of Otti Vincent, a high-ranking LRA commander engaged in the talks, on the orders of Kony, who was concerned – possibly rightfully – that Otti was plotting with the Ugandan government behind his back (Schomerus 2012a: 177–180). The talks were resumed only six months later, in January 2008. In February, additions to the already signed Agenda Items 2 and 3 and a final agreement on disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) and a permanent ceasefire were negotiated. On 10 April, Kony was supposed to add his signature to the agreement before it would be signed by Museveni four days later. But Kony didn't show for the signing, supposedly because he was dissatisfied with some of the provisions on accountability, especially ambiguities about the fate of the ICC warrants. Another deadline to sign the peace agreement, accompanied by a ceasefire and repeated verbal confirmations by Museveni that he would request the ICC to defer or suspend the arrest warrants, was set for 29–30 November 2008. Again, Kony didn't show up, and as Uganda didn't

waste much time before launching another attack only two weeks later, the peace process was soon considered unsuccessful.

In sum, the negotiations failed as a result of mistrust on both sides, and not least because of legal hurdles and insecurities that couldn't be resolved sufficiently in the negotiations. A number of interviewees insisted that the failure of the peace process was ultimately due to the ICC warrants:

I really thought the peace talks were going to bear fruits and we could rest from the suffering we have gone through in captivity. And back then I really had hope because I saw lots of traditional leaders from Acholiland and also so many members of Parliament, and different people from different departments of the UPDF, soldiers with higher ranks. [...] [M]ost of the issues on the agenda were signed already, I understand that there was a part Kony was supposed to sign and he did not sign it, he gave a condition that if they want him to sign the paper, the ICC issue must be removed. [...] According to me, I think Kony was serious about the peace agreement, the only thing that spoiled it was the ICC. (Joel, ll. 442–485)

While the peace talks hadn't resulted in the resolution of the conflict, the war had left northern Uganda, and the transition on the ground was under way. People hesitantly started to leave the camps again, moving back home or to smaller 'decongestion' camps, or they stayed in the camps and started to cultivate the surrounding area again.

### **Withdrawal into Congo and CAR, December 2008–2010**

The Juba Peace Talks also meant peace for South Sudan. By the end of 2006, the LRA had left their bases in South Sudan and relocated all of their units to Garamba National Park in the DRC (Cakaj 2010: 4). In Garamba, the level of violence and abductions decreased considerably. The LRA and the Congolese government lived alongside each other in blissful ignorance until July–August 2008, when the Congolese army, the Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC) started to station troops on both sides of the park. The LRA responded to this perceived provocation with attacks against Congolese and South Sudanese civilians, and also engaged in battles with troops of the SPLA and FARDC (Atkinson 2010b: 221). Shortly thereafter, hostilities stopped to allow for the signing of the peace agreements scheduled for 29–30 November. But just

two weeks after the deadline passed, on 14 December 2008, and with support from the United States African Command (AFRICOM), the UPDF began attacking settlements of the LRA in Garamba National Park. The large-scale attacks became known as *Operation Lightning Thunder*. In response, violence by the LRA against civilians flared again. In late December 2008 and January 2009, and again a year later, the LRA launched a series of large-scale attacks on the civilian populations in northern Congo that became known as the Christmas massacres.<sup>32</sup> Since then, the LRA has been slowly but steadily diminished both through military interventions by the Ugandan forces (with the direct and indirect support of the US and the African Union) and through defections. By the end of 2010, the LRA had been decimated to an estimated force of 400 fighters (Cakaj 2010, Lancaster and Cakaj 2013: 55).

### Recent developments and current state

It is doubtful whether the LRA still aims at overthrowing the Ugandan government. Vinci (2007) made a compelling argument that today's LRA is in mere survival mode, not being in a position to make substantial strides towards their self-declared goal, surviving on revenue streams that undermine their credibility, being both too weak to fight and too vulnerable to lay down their guns. With the ongoing trial of Dominic Ongwen at the ICC,<sup>33</sup> and the pre-trial hearings in the case against Thomas Kwoyelo at the International Crimes Division (ICD) at the High Court of Uganda, it is unclear whether the top commanders will be inclined to defect only to face prosecution.

Those who are wanted by the ICC or who fear criminal prosecution and those born into the LRA arguably do not have much of an incentive or even inclination to leave. There are only speculative numbers on the current troop strength of the LRA. In June 2017, Cakaj (2017c) estimated that there are fewer than 80 active fighters remaining (plus wives and young children), supported by an unspecified and ever shifting number of temporary captives used as porters and guides. Whatever the exact number of fighters, the LRA has been significantly

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<sup>32</sup>For further reference, see Human Rights Watch (2009, 2010).

<sup>33</sup>The trial of Dominic Ongwen began on 6 December 2016. In January 2017, the prosecution started to present its case, which continued throughout 2017 and was concluded on 12 April 2018. The process is documented on the ICC's homepage: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/uganda/ongwen>. Summaries of the trials dates can be found at <https://www.ijmonitor.org/category/lra-trials>.

weakened in recent years, and it is unlikely that they will regain strength any time soon. Recent defections of high-ranking officers<sup>34</sup> and of a whole unit in December 2013 under the leadership of Okello Okutti have been severe setbacks for the LRA. Credible reports of a mutiny against Kony (Cakaj 2015a), as well as rumours about his delicate state of health (Invisible Children 2015, Owich 2017) and of the disengagement of at least three groups (Cakaj 2015b: 9), likewise point to a weakened leadership.

Over the last years, Kony has made some moves to strengthen control and command; most visibly, by promoting younger fighters into positions of responsibility and demoting senior commanders (Lancaster and Cakaj 2013: 16). Kony's own children Salim, Ali and Caudit, who are, as of 2018, supposedly 26, 24 and 14 years old, have been continuously promoted, and it is rumoured that Kony is preparing one of his older sons to become his successor (Cakaj 2015b, United Nations Security Council 2016a,b). Moreover, the LRA seems to draw more heavily on female combatants as fighters. Most recently, non-Acholi combatants have risen in the ranks that have been previously reserved for fighters of Ugandan origin.

The cessation of Sudanese support has presented a challenge for the survival of the LRA. In recent years, the LRA has increasingly engaged in trading commodities, particularly, by poaching elephants in Garamba National Park and trading the ivory tusks for ammunition, equipment and food in Sudan (Agger and Hutson 2013, Cakaj 2015b, Christy 2015, Titeca 2013).<sup>35</sup> While this new source of income has proven to be crucial to the survival of the group, it has come at a price. Combatants who have recently defected or been captured report a growing disillusionment with the cause of the LRA (Cakaj 2011) that is only aggravated by the use of strategies that de-legitimise their stated political goals. The recruitment of more and more non-Acholi soldiers also means that many of today's members do not relate at all to their political struggle.

As the capacity of the LRA has considerably weakened, the efforts to demobilise its remnants have decreased as well. In June 2016, the US announced that it would withdraw its troops (an estimated force of 2'500 fighters) from CAR by

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<sup>34</sup>Namely, Opiyo Sam, June 2014; Dominic Ongwen, January 2015; and Okot Odek, February 2016.

<sup>35</sup>To a lesser extent, the LRA has also traded raw materials like gold and diamonds looted from artisanal miners in CAR (Cakaj 2015b: 16).

the end of 2016 (Associated Press 2016). While Kony is still out there, supposedly hiding in Kafia Kingi (Cakaj 2015b) or in southern Dafur (Kasasira 2016), the US stated that its mission is fulfilled, since the LRA combatants “have been sufficiently degraded” (Associated Press 2016). In August 2016, the UPDF started to withdraw its troops stationed in CAR, and announced that it would be out by the end of the year. Since April 2017, no armed actors are actively engaged in fighting the LRA anymore (Cakaj and Titeca 2017).

This withdrawal and the history of the LRA – one of the longest-lived non-state armed groups worldwide – poses the question of how committed the Ugandan government was and is in its fight against the LRA (see also Dolan 2009: 72–73). Some observers have suspected that its interest was limited to keeping the LRA weak enough not to pose a direct threat to the government’s grip on power, but relevant enough that it could ask for assistance in fighting it. They have argued that, by exploiting the carefully fabricated image of vulnerability and strength to their advantage, the Ugandan government is actually engaging in strategies of extraversion.<sup>36</sup> While the LRA is at a historic low, it is unclear whether the withdrawal of its adversaries is giving the LRA the chance to replenish their ranks. The re-election of Museveni in February 2016 in a heated race whose free and fair circumstances were debatable (Dörrie and Schlindwein 2016, European Union Election Observation Mission 2016, Kwon et al. 2016) certainly didn’t help the case. Rumour has it that Museveni (ironically, not unlike Kony) is preparing his son Muhoozi Kainerugaba, who was promoted in May 2016 to Major General in the UPDF, to become his successor. Up to today, the grievances that gave rise to the LRA remain unresolved, and might even outlive their protagonists.

Looking at Uganda’s and the LRA’s history helps to understand the reasons for the latter’s puzzling resilience on the macro level; that is, it is important to understand the political environment in which the LRA emerged and survives up to today. From this perspective, the LRA’s survival is the consequence of a number of contributing factors: First, the lack of commitment to and challenges in militarily defeating the LRA. The reluctance to put any more effort into this project has only recently been underscored by the withdrawal of U.S. troops in March 2017, and the subsequent withdrawal of the Ugandan and African Union

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<sup>36</sup>See, for instance, Fisher (2014). On the use of shadow soldiers, see Mwenda (2010). A similar argument on the “benefits of famine” has been presented by Keen (2008).



forces in April 2017 (Okiror 2017). Second, the conflicting messages sent out to active fighters between general amnesty and international prosecution have time and again undermined an effective demobilisation of the LRA. The ongoing trials of Dominic Ongwen and Thomas Kwoyelo, the slow and only partial renewal of the Amnesty Act, and the dissolution of reporting sites following the withdrawal of troops on the ground have added to a sense of legal insecurity, and will probably further discourage active combatants from returning from the bush. But most important, the Ugandan government has never addressed the problems that lie at the roots of the insurgency of the LRA and its at times numerous competitors. It has never given priority to investigating and prosecuting (and, in fact, has even contributed to) the abuse of civilians in northern Uganda by soldiers of the NRA/M;<sup>37</sup> their displacement, impoverishment and social dislocation in the camps, and the struggle over land that resulted; their vulnerability to being recruited into armed groups at a tender age, be it as home guards or combatants, thereby severely affecting their chances to earn a living today; and their marginalisation in the nation's development, particular in regard to infrastructure (roads, water, electricity, and health care) and education. For large parts of the country, Museveni and his government stand for a period of steady, if modest, growth. While everybody complains about corruption in the government and the military, the debilitating effects of decentralisation, and Museveni's overstaying in power, many, especially among the rural population, are satisfied enough or too afraid to bet on the possibility of political change by raising their voice against the incumbent.

Given these circumstances, it is highly unlikely that the remnants of the LRA will give up the fight anytime soon. And even if today's LRA is just a shadow of the fighting force it was at the height of the conflict, its perseverance is a disconcerting reality. Though it is improbable that the LRA will return to Uganda, a small number of combatants abducted in Uganda and their children born in the bush are still returning, joining a much larger number of young combatants who have returned over the years. Their presence is as challenging for them as it is for the society and communities they live in. Many former combatants have grown into adults, and their perspectives on their lives continue to shape the ideas and visions northern Uganda has about itself. Their stories become part of its story and are both disruptive and productive. To tell these stories, and to show how

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<sup>37</sup>Though Yoweri Museveni admitted to and condemned these atrocities during a military function in January 2014, and promised a thorough investigation of these cases and legal prosecution of the culprits (Kwesiga et al. 2014), so far, no action to that end has been undertaken.

they relate to the struggles (northern) Uganda faces today, will be part of the following analysis.

## 4.1 Getting a gun and becoming a soldier: Initiation and socialisation

### Abstract

What does it mean to become part of an armed group? Why and how do people become professional fighters? A number of studies (see for instance Brett and Specht 2004, Richards 2008, Utas 2003) have shown that the decision to pick up a gun and join an armed group is complex and influenced by a number of environmental, situational, normative and individual aspects. Understanding what motivates combatants is further complicated by the fact that people's attitudes may change as they act (Gates 2011, Littman and Paluck 2015). But what happens if there is no such decision to begin with? How do people become something they never aspired to be, and how do they get good at it? In this chapter, I will describe the process of initiation and socialisation into the LRA. I will show that becoming a member of the LRA is not experienced as a singular event, but as a process that is performed through a number of status passages: abduction and endurance training, registration, getting a gun, military training and education, and receiving a rank. I will argue that the incremental inclusion of new recruits into the LRA is crucial to understanding how they became committed and loyal fighters, or, at the very least, combatants who were less invested in *getting out* than in making the most of *being in* the organisation.

### Abduction and endurance training

The majority of the combatants joined the LRA by force, i.e. by abduction at gunpoint.<sup>1</sup> Typically, they were abducted at night, and sometimes during the

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<sup>1</sup>Only a small proportion of combatants joined the LRA voluntarily in its early days, and most of them have since risen in the ranks or died. Since circa 1994, volunteers have been

day while in or on their way to or from the gardens they cultivated. Others were caught on their way to or at the very places they commuted to during the night, trying to escape abduction: public places in town (like churches, schools, hospitals, courts or even the streets), make-shift hideouts in the bush (referred to as *alup*<sup>2</sup>), or even the ‘protected villages’ they were resettled in. Most interviewees remembered their abduction vividly, and described what happened in detail:

It was close to midnight. [...] I was dreaming at that time and heard gunshots from A [a place in Gulu district] centre. I went out of the house, and after I returned to the house, I slept again. I was dreaming that I was abducted. I dreamt that one of us ran very fast and couldn’t be abducted. When I ran I was so tired, I fell down. That was when I woke up from my dream. Upon waking up I saw the rebels in the house ordering all of us to get up. (Mercy, ll. 105–120)

My first abduction, it was due to a food problem. It was around 8 pm, and all my friends with whom we lived had already eaten at their homes. So they came to me and told me to now go to the *alup*. [...] And I told them: “I am hungry, I cannot go like this.” So when the water boiled I prepared the bread and I was supposed to carry the bread down. That was when I saw very bright torch lights surrounding the hut I was in and even all the people outside at the *wang oo* [fire place].<sup>3</sup> I was still inside and thus was the only one who had not been abducted yet. I saw a bright torchlight and when I wanted to get out there, they were, they were the ones with the light. (Charles, ll. 416–438)

When I was abducted, it was my first time living here. I had just spent maybe two weeks here because our family used to live in Jinja<sup>4</sup>. It was at 1 am at night when we all slept. All of a sudden we realised our hands were caught. We lived in the center but that day we had gone to the bush to hide from the rebels. We had been warned to go take refuge before and my grandmother decided to go to a certain home at

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virtually absent (apart maybe from those who rejoined after escape) (Blattman and Annan 2008: 6). Only a small number of the volunteers returned from the bush – among them, Brigadier Kenneth Banya, Major General Caesar Acellam, and Brigadier Sam Kolo.

<sup>2</sup>Throughout the analysis, I will introduce the Acholi terms wherever useful. Often, different spellings coexist; here, I will use the spellings and translations suggested in Odonga (2005) and by my Acholi research assistants.

<sup>3</sup>The fire place has a special meaning in Acholi culture, since it is a popular place to gather, tell stories and educate children. See also Oloya (2013: 42).

<sup>4</sup>Jinja is a town in eastern Uganda, located approximately 80 kilometres east of Kampala. Except for a short period in 1987, when the HSM tried to take Kampala, Jinja was not scene of the civil war. See also Chapter 3 starting on page 43.

the center where many people used to sleep in. It was a big home that housed children. At 1 am they called the name of the owner of the house and they ordered him to open the door, which he didn't. They then kicked the door in and entered the house. When they entered, they shouted: "Get up, get up, get up!". I was just learning Acholi back then, we all stood up and they tied our waists with ropes. We then all went out of the house. [...] from there we were taken to a certain house. We were many kids who were abducted, maybe ten of us. Many other people were also abducted from the surrounding areas. We were all put in the same house and the place was full of people. Surprisingly, there were UPDF soldiers with their Mamba and tankers at the center. They didn't do anything [to help]. We were told to enter the house. We didn't know these people had a plan of burning us in the house. I didn't know. [...] They were arguing outside whether to burn us inside or not. [...] "We have children in there that can help us", they argued. They continued the argument that we could hardly hear. And then they came and pushed all of us out of the house and we started walking. (Faith, ll. 71–128)

In these narratives of abduction, war doesn't suddenly enter the picture; it is already there, be it in the sound of nearby gunshots, in nightmares, rumours, or strategies of evasion. People are abducted from the town centres and makeshift homes they commute to at sunset, trying to prevent their abduction, trying to get out of war's way. Their everyday is structured by the presence of war and their strategies to deal with it. Still, their abduction breaks quite radically with the kind of life they are used to.

Some of my interviewees recounted that they were abducted alone, only meeting other new abductees on their way to or at an assembly point. Others reported that they were abducted together with members of the same household (siblings, parents or uncles) or community. The main targets of these abduction missions were adolescent boys. Girls were targeted for their physical features and (pre-)adolescent age, assuming that they hadn't had sexual intercourse before and were therefore less likely to have contracted HIV. For the same reason, older women were rarely kept, but were sometimes used as guides or porters and released on the way (see also Annan et al. 2009: 7). While the LRA has often been portrayed as an army of child soldiers, the majority of combatants were adults (Cakaj 2010: 7).<sup>5</sup> Most abductees were asked to take provisions they kept at their

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<sup>5</sup>In my core sample, 13 (7) of 43 interviewees were presumably 18 (21) years or older upon abduction, all of them male (see Table 1). (By comparison, the average age of draftees in the Vietnam War was just below 20 years; after basic training or a couple of months of service else-

place with them, or were given other luggage to carry. Typically, they continued to walk throughout the day or night, only resting briefly to prepare and eat some food. They were strongly discouraged, either with words or through (exemplary) violent action, from complaining or showing signs of weakness. People witnessed others being beaten if they couldn't keep up with the group's pace or if they admitted that they were struggling. Many abductees described what happened if they asked to rest, or were asked if they wanted to take a break:

Many children's feet started swelling since we walked barefoot. People's feet swelled, but if you told them that you were tired, they would say they would let you rest, meaning they would kill you. You were not supposed to say you are tired. Even if you were very tired or your feet hurt you should persevere and move with the rest of the people. That is how combat was. We would sleep in the rain. (Faith, ll. 306–315)

Those people who could not walk anymore and were very tired were killed. But they were deceived that they were being taken back home. In that process, they picked one of the rebels to go with them and kill them on the way. And when he came back with a machete that was stained with blood (...) [...] Then they said to us that if we failed to walk they would do exactly the same thing to us. (Ivy, ll. 89–107)

While children who were too young or weak to keep up with these challenges were sometimes freed, they could also be severely punished or even killed on the way. This punishment was either performed in the open for others to see and learn from it, or apart from the group without further discussion. Apart from their sheer necessity, these ordeals in walking and carrying heavy luggage are a first lesson in the normative universe of the LRA. New recruits quickly learn that the combatants are serious, that there is no room to misstep, that one has to be tough to survive. Moreover, new combatants come to understand that these ordeals are a kind of test of whether they are worth keeping, that is, if they are an asset or a liability. Joan described her experience:

When morning arrived I had carried very heavy luggage, including

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where, GIs were typically around 22 years of age; Greiner 2010: 114–115.) The high percentage of adolescents is both an effect of demographics (half of Uganda's population is below 15 years of age; World Health Organization 2015) and recruitment strategy (young people were targeted because they were easier to impress). On the LRA's recruitment strategy, see also Chapter 4.5 starting on page 148.

groundnuts [peanuts] that overpowered me. They gave me two basins of shelled groundnut seeds to carry. I couldn't handle that weight. At some point I couldn't move with the luggage anymore, my neck hurt and I was exhausted. I couldn't move any longer and at some point they noted that if I couldn't move, I'd rather be killed. They said that if the battle started, I wouldn't be able to move with them and there was no one to carry me along the way. One of the girls came and whispered to me that if I don't persevere, I will be killed. She said if I couldn't move with the luggage I should ask the rebels to remove the luggage so that I can walk without it. (Joan, ll. 269–287)

While Joan failed to move fast enough while carrying the luggage, she demonstrated her willingness and capability to keep up with the group's pace by asking to be relieved of the additional weight.

The often disproportionate use of violence upon abduction and the constant threat of it are meant to demonstrate to new abductees that the LRA isn't (yet) invested in their survival, and that it will not bother to keep them unless they manage to meet the LRA's expectations. The stories of the interviewees depict an environment in which new abductees are confronted with the fact that any display of weakness or resistance can put their life at risk. They are challenged to exhaust themselves, to go above and beyond, to avoid being singled out.

### Initiation and registration

After a while – usually between a couple of days and a few weeks – new abductees were further initiated into the group. They were no longer considered captives, but new members of the LRA. This initiation was typically marked by an event. Many interviewees described how they were subjected to a ritual called *registration* (*coyo imony* - to be registered as a soldier):

There was a time we were told to organise ourselves and be recruited as combatants. We didn't know what it was like. We were all called to go. They said that if your name was Julie, they would count the letters in that name or if it were Faith, how many letters were those. If you count and tell them, they would tell you to bend your back and you would think they are interested in doing something not so bad but they would beat you with a wire lock. If Julie has five letters, they would beat or flog your back five times. Even on your ankle you would be beaten. (*demonstrates*) They would then tell you to stand up and that would be the end of the recruitment process. (Faith, ll. 232–248)

When I was in captivity for just one or two months, all new abductees were taken for what they called registration in the army. They cut a bunch of canes or sticks. They would call us one by one and four men caned you using those sticks. We were caned 200 strokes on the back. They beat us so hard and we didn't bathe for close to three days. You weren't nursed and you were left to suffer with your wounds. (Jackson, ll. 797–807)

These beatings were described as serious, and often continued until the abductee lost consciousness, sometimes just stopping short of death. The interviewees told us that they were advised not to show any signs of pain or suffering during the registration process. If they screamed or tried to protect their buttocks from the beating, they would receive more strokes, or more severe beatings. Sometimes, the performance of their registration involved some kind of fake choice exercised by the combatants:

[A]nother thing done during trainings is that they hit you with a *panga* [machete], and ask you to choose between a *chapati*<sup>6</sup> and a hammer, which one you want. If you say a *chapati*, then the *panga* is put in the fire and you are hit with it. [...] They put it on fire and when it is hot enough then they pick it up and beat your back with it, like this, like this (*demonstrating*), two lines crossing each other. After this you go to the other side and you are a qualified soldier. [...] [If you say hammer,] [t]hey put it [your finger] on a piece of log and hit it with a hammer. (Charles, ll. 763–790)

As these examples show, the initiation of new combatants happened to a large extent through violence. Like Charles, some are even forced to play a game they can't win, with equally bad outcomes regardless of how they act and decide.

Violent initiation was often not limited to experiencing it, but also included performing it, for instance, by asking new combatants to do the beating. This was often a collective task. Armed with sticks, *pangas* or bayonets, they either took turns, or beat or pierced the person all at once. If they failed to do so, or if they tried to spare their fellows by beating them too lightly, they could be punished as well:

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<sup>6</sup> *Chapati* is a kind of flat-bread popular in Uganda, often served cut into pieces as a side dish or filled with eggs and vegetables as a *rolax* (a derivative from 'rolled eggs').



There was a time I was told to beat one of my close friends. I felt bad about it so I decided to relax my hands and beat her softly. [...] I thought I wouldn't be beaten for acting nice to my colleague. But they ordered me to lie down so that my colleague beats me. She beat me without mercy. Her strokes were so hard, I realised I was just joking with her. They had told her that if she beats me mildly, she would be beaten harshly in return. She was beaten on the back as an example of how she should beat me. It was so painful to her. She beat me seriously. (Scovia, ll. 1092–1110)

These initiation rituals closely resemble the practices of 'beating in' and 'going on a mission' in youth gangs (see Decker 1996: 254–255). In these rituals, new gang members are either beaten up by their fellows or asked to perform a test of courage that typically includes perpetrating violence (for instance, engaging in a fight with members of a rival gang). All three kinds of rituals – witnessing, perpetrating, and being subjected to violence – were meant to *initiate new members into violence*. Their registration emphasises the central role violence plays for the organisation. As Decker (1996: 255) argues with regard to youth gangs, “[s]uch violence always has a group context and a normative purpose: to reinforce the ties between members while reminding them that violence lies at the core of life in the gang”. The violence of initiation in the LRA seems to have served the same purposes: By experiencing and performing violence, new combatants learned how they were expected to act, but also what to expect from the organisation.

Moreover, these initiations were *tests of toughness*, in which new combatants had to show they are “strong-hearted” (*cwiny nwang*) (Henry, ll. 673, 679) and thereby worthy to become part of the organisation. Such subsequent approval procedures result, as I would argue, from the forced nature of participation. They replace, so to speak, the mutual binding commitment that characterises organisations that have more or less voluntary members instead of captives.<sup>7</sup> In an organisation, the decision to become a member typically creates some commitment to the organisation's goals and tasks. People who decide to join an organisation – for instance, as an employee of a company – know about their terms of engagement, their rights and duties, and base their decision to become part of the organisation on their willingness to comply with these rules (Luhmann 1995: 36–38). At the same time, their membership status may motivate them to do things they wouldn't have done otherwise, because they feel committed

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<sup>7</sup>As Axel Paul and I recently suggested (Paul and Härtel 2015), the combatants of the LRA have to be seen as forced personnel or inmates in the total institution of the LRA.

to perform even non-agreed upon tasks in their capacity as members. Organisations like the LRA that recruit their personnel through force cannot count on the same kind of membership-based commitment. Here, rituals of incremental and performance-based inclusion like tests of toughness step in. They replace or rather make up for the lack of initial commitment under conditions of forced recruitment. Through these rites of initiation, new combatants were asked to make a commitment to the LRA.

*Initiation into the group* The narratives of the interviewees show time and again that, by perpetrating and taking up violence, combatants commit to the rules of the organisation. But they also become more committed to each other as they suffer through the same ordeals. They sympathise and bond with their fellows over the painful experiences they themselves endure, and which they witness being done to others. Here, it is not just the rather passive experience of violence, but also its exercise that brings new combatants closer to each other. The perpetration of violence is always a transgression, as it violates the physical integrity of another person. It is an aversive act that most individuals try to avoid, and that provokes strong emotional responses (Collins 2009, Grossman 2009). Violence and killing in particular are also serious violations of the norms of the Acholi, who perform a number of rituals to appease the spirits of people who died from an unnatural cause (Oloya 2013: 84). The collective or at least shared transgression of these norms can be seen as a crucial element to strengthen the in-group identity. In a quantitative study on former combatants in the LRA, Littman and Paluck (2015) found that members who admitted to having perpetrated more violence also reported a higher level of identification with the group.

The interviews show that as violence became part of their everyday lives, new combatants became further detached from their lives as civilians. They were encouraged to unlearn to relate to their former life, and sometimes they even started to resent those who have no idea what it was like to be in their position. While their actions became less compatible with the norms of life at home, combatants recounted how they became somewhat more comfortable with being in the bush, where people didn't question or judge them. In this sense, violence *eases their transition* from civilian life to life in the bush. Violent initiation is a central ingredient in this two-sided dynamic of detachment from civilian life and identification with their group of combatants.

But more than anything, these violent performances of the LRA were *demon-*

*strations of power*. Quasi-decisions like choosing between two bad alternatives (hammer or *chapati*) and counting the letters in a recruit's name to determine the number of strokes were meant to demonstrate to the recruits that the LRA was serious, and that its actions were not constrained by appropriateness. Most importantly, they were designed to teach the new recruits that escape was a high risk strategy that one shouldn't pursue lightly:

You see, when they just abducted you and you are new, they don't trust you at all. That is why all newly abducted are strictly kept together, so that you don't find an opportunity to escape. They also tell you that if you ever try to escape, you will be killed in front of everyone. It happened once, a boy who was abducted from X [a place in Agago district] was caught attempting to escape. He was beaten with logs while everyone was watching until he died. It was so painful to witness. I think no one ever thought of escaping afterwards. (Isaac, ll. 65–79)

What I showed them [the people under my command] was exactly what they [we] did; so I showed them that anyone who tries to escape must be killed. So that was the thing I used to do while I was commanding the forces. For example, there were three people who tried to escape and they were brought to me. I made them stand before the congregation and they were cut into pieces. Nobody escaped after that. (George, ll. 248–257)

In their narratives, both interviewees made the same point, though from two different perspectives. While Isaac recounts the incident as a new recruit witnessing the killing of a colleague, in George's story, he is the one ordering for escapees' execution. Both accounts show how violent initiation served as an effective *deterrent against escape*. While some abductees tried to escape right away and succeeded, many said they were too afraid of being caught and severely punished, even more so since they were monitored closely (see also Annan et al. 2006: 62). Especially in the first weeks, when new abductees weren't yet used to this kind of life, and constantly thought about how they could undo its violent turn, the permanent threat of violence became perhaps the most convincing argument for sticking it out, if only for the time being.

In their stories, the interviewees emphasised that their transition from abductee to soldier was also furthered by non-violent rituals of *cleansing and communion*. Upon joining the LRA, new recruits were considered unholy and unclean, as their mindset was seen as that of a civilian. Many combatants received some

kind of baptism, in which they were sprinkled with holy water or anointed with sheanut oil (*moo yaa*),<sup>8</sup> an essence that was considered sacred and was not used for consumption. Some were also given amulets with holy stones (Victor 2011: 64). Both rituals were meant to protect the new combatants in battles (hence, sheanut oil was also referred to as *camouflage*). Their main purpose, though, seemed to lie in their symbolic function as rituals of communion, that is, of admission to a new community of ‘holies’, as senior LRA combatants referred to themselves. Cleansing rituals were used to make new recruits forget about civilian life and to rebuild them as soldiers. The status of sheanut oil as a rare and valued ingredient underscored the importance of the anointment as a ritual of communion.<sup>9</sup> As such, “the ritual [of anointment with *moo yaa*] became a form of identity card, a signifier that the recruit had crossed the threshold into the fold of the LRM/A” (Oloya 2013: 87).<sup>10</sup>

These rituals are not necessarily as schematic and public as described here and elsewhere, and the interviewees told us that they were sometimes even left out. This observation does not question the importance of rituals of initiation and transition. Instead, it proves the LRA’s status as an opportunistic and flexible organisation that cannot afford to stick (and, by inversion, can afford not to stick) to its institutions regardless of the circumstances. But even if some of these initiation rituals were modified or omitted, all combatants described how they were subject to rituals that marked their passage from recruit to soldier. Among these, one significant ritual is the assignment of uniforms and guns.<sup>11</sup>

### Getting a gun

During their first weeks in the bush, new recruits would be closely supervised and were typically unarmed. Their initiation into the group was deepened by the assignment of a gun. In most cases, these were light-weight assault rifles commonly referred to as AK-47s or Kalashnikovs.<sup>12</sup> This assignment could be part of

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<sup>8</sup>A ritual called *wiiro moo yaa* (literally, anointing with sheanut oil); see also Oloya (2013: 86–90).

<sup>9</sup>In this sense, it also served as a prerequisite for commensality (Oloya 2013: 87).

<sup>10</sup>These initiation rituals are also described in Baines (2005), Hollander (2013), Victor (2011), and Vermeij (2014). As a social practice, *wiiro moo yaa* imitates the anointment of *rwodi* (chiefs or kings).

<sup>11</sup>Another important ritual (mostly for the female combatants) is the assignment to a household and the process of becoming a spouse, which I will detail in Chapter 4.5 starting on page 148.

<sup>12</sup>For a list of commonly used weapons, see Cakaj (2010: 17–18).

a ceremony that confirmed their status as combatants (as described in Hollander 2013), or it could be just a casual hand-out. Most combatants handled their own guns and were responsible for their upkeep and whereabouts.<sup>13</sup> Some combatants described some kind of documentation in which the guns were registered under the name of a particular person, ensuring that the individual who lost it would be held accountable.<sup>14</sup>

In captivity, if you are given a gun and you make the mistake of losing it or if someone takes it, you are severely beaten. I was beaten twice for such silly mistakes. Something I won't forget. On that day I was given the gun and I forgot it under a tree. When they issued guns they registered their numbers specifying who received it. They found out that mine was missing and of course knew for the other people [missing their gun] too. (Scovia, ll. 587–599)

At a minimum, everybody learned how to dismantle, reassemble and shoot a gun, regardless of whether they actively participated in battles. At least until the late 1990s or early 2000s, guns and ammunition were even distributed among the wives who mostly had no obligation to participate in combat, so they would be able to defend themselves in case the battlefield shifted into the camps or reached their temporary settlements.

Most combatants also received uniforms and gumboots, which were usually obtained in battles (with forces of the UPDF, SPLA, or FARDC), supplied by the Sudanese forces, or purchased in exchange for other goods (Cakaj 2010: 17). Sometimes, combatants were requested to take the uniforms, ammunition and gumboots, “[a]nything that is with the soldiers” (Henry, ll. 619–620), from fallen enemy combatants. In this case, they served both as a proof of bravery on the battlefield and as supply for the LRA (in particular, basic equipment for the new combatants). In other instances, these tokens were picked up by so-called ‘rescue teams’, whose task was to clear the battlefield after fighting or when the battlefront shifted.

Uniforms served both practical and symbolic purposes. At night, they were used as blankets, and during the day, they helped to conceal the combatants’

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<sup>13</sup>This is somewhat less true for the female combatants; for the last 15 years, women were generally forbidden to carry weapons (Cakaj 2017a).

<sup>14</sup>At times, weapons were also stored in granaries and would not be assigned to individuals.

identity from government soldiers and civilians alike. But guns and also, in part, uniforms had meanings that went beyond their obvious utility in confrontations with enemy forces. They were perceived as (1) means of identification and distinction, (2) means of protection, (3) tools of empowerment, and (4) symbols of success.

*Gun and uniforms as means of identification and distinction.* A common narrative is that guns identified new combatants as soldiers or, literally, as ‘persons of war’ (*lumony*). Handling a gun symbolised, both to others and to the combatants themselves, that they had left their civilian life and identity behind:

When we stayed there for a while they said that they were going to register some of us as combatants. I also went for registration. The registration is done by caning people 100 strokes, so there we were given strokes. Eleven of us. Then in the evening we were smeared with sheanut oil. And the next morning, we were given guns, *and then we were soldiers already*. (Ivy, ll. 169–178; my emphasis)

Once we were divided [into different groups], me and the other abductees were trained how to shoot guns. They trained us for about one week. Afterwards we were given uniforms and guns. All of us then realised we had become soldiers! (*laughs*) Do you see how funny these people are? (Isaac, ll. 88–95)

These narratives show how the gun marks and facilitates the passage from recruit to soldier. The assignment of a gun meant that one was no longer a prisoner but a combatant, and therefore, part of the community: “everyone was the same, provided you have a gun” (Ivy, ll. 329–330). By handling a gun, combatants distinguished themselves from mere captives who had no gun, while becoming equals among those who had one. Not only is the gun assigned to the new recruit, but it assigns the person to her new profession, her role as a soldier. The gun does this job better than any other piece of equipment, because it points without any ambiguity to the task at hand: to perform in combat, to shoot and possibly kill others. Uniforms worked in a similar, if more subtle manner: By looking the part, new combatants eased into playing the roles assigned to them.

*Guns as a means of protection.* Many combatants, women in particular, voiced conflicted feeling about holding a gun. For them, their gun symbolised two contradictory things: it was a constant reminder of the violent action they were expected to perform, but also a necessary means to protect themselves from harm. While

not everyone was expected to go into battles all the time, and periods of heavy fighting alternated with phases of relative calm, war was always an option. People were prepared to leave their temporary settlements at a moment's notice, which often meant fighting, at least in rearguard action. Janet and Joshua explained:

If you have just been abducted and taken to their site, they teach you everything about being a soldier, including dismantling and assembling the gun. You are taught how to shoot the gun. You are as well given ammunition. They say the gun will help you do anything. It is used during fights and wars. Sometimes wars [fights] suddenly start. So if you have a gun you can shoot and survive. (Janet, ll. 478–488)

Aah, as a soldier the gun protects your life. So if you don't have a gun it means your life is in someone else's hands. You lived with your colleagues and in case a fight broke out, there would be a gun to protect yourself. If you have a gun, you can protect yourself. (Joshua, ll. 728–734)

Apart from confrontations with the government forces, many combatants confirmed the need for guns in other hostile environments, in particular, among the (South) Sudanese civilians who were portrayed as belligerent and well armed, and in the national parks that were inhabited by wild animals. Many combatants described how they initially felt uncomfortable handling a gun, but soon got used to it, and even started to become attached to it:

I found life with a gun was so interesting and if I moved without a gun I felt like some part of me was missing. [...] Where we were our enemies used to attack us so often. That is why I felt safe and more secure to have a gun with me. Because at that time if you were captured by the government soldiers you were killed. If you have a gun when someone is shooting at you, you are in a position to fight back. (Charity, ll. 395–409)

In Charity's narrative, the gun isn't introduced as an instrument to cause physical harm, but as a necessary means of protection against those who try to attack her and her colleagues. And it seems that for many combatants, handling a gun became not only a routine but a lifestyle. Moving without the insignia of a soldier's life caused some combatants to feel not only physically disarmed, but also debilitated on a psychological level. Without a gun, you "have to live empty-handed" (John, ll. 1070), without any means to protect yourself from harm, and

to “fight back”, as Charity said. In an environment that put combatants at permanent risk, having a gun meant to reclaim some control over one’s life by taking measures to protect it. Many combatants kept their guns even upon escape, although they knew that escaping with a gun was an even more serious violation of the LRA’s rules and also identified them as combatants to the civilian population.

*Guns as a tool of empowerment.* In the interviewees’ stories, the gun is appreciated not only for what it is, but for what it symbolises: the reclamation of agency. While registration rituals were about putting new combatants ‘in their place’, designed to show them that they are powerless and not entitled to any agency whatsoever, the assignment of a gun partly reversed this message. By commanding a gun, new combatants not only became soldiers, but gained respect as persons:

I really prefer being a combatant [over being a housewife], because most of the time on the battlefield I would feel better. In most cases we stayed in Uganda, and the commander that we were under was a very good person. He treated combatants with respect and if things failed he would encourage the other soldiers to try hard [...]. (Patience, ll. 321–329)

Having a gun meant to be not only no longer on the receiving end of abuse anymore, but also to be in a position with (albeit limited) choices. It signified to others that one was to be treated fairly, and in some cases, combatants made use of the gun for private ends. Male combatants in particular used their weapons to exercise power over others, mostly their given wives. For instance, Patience described how her given husband forced intercourse at gunpoint:

When he [Odhiambo] told me to lie down, I sat instead and he grabbed me by my neck and said: “I can kill you, and who do you think can arrest or punish me?” So he grabbed me and cocked his gun and started to tear my clothes off. He then forced me to sleep with him, and that was when I got to know sex. (Patience, ll. 150–158)

While Patience’s husband used the gun to enforce abuse and expectations of subjugation, in other instances guns empowered those in a weaker position. Patience herself recounted an incident where she was punished by her husband over allegations of refusing to work. In the course of the argument, he began to stab her with the bayonet, and when she felt overwhelmed by the pain, she fought



back: “I pressed the gun down and said to him that me coming here was not his plan, but Kony’s. So I can make him kill me and I rest my case. I defeated him and got his gun, I hit his head with it and then I started screaming loud enough [for others to hear me]” (Patience, ll. 382–389). In the end, her husband was punished by the high command for mistreating her, which improved her position for good: “And after that, he never touched me till I came back” (Patience, ll. 421–422). In this scene, the gun worked as an equaliser between Patience and her more powerful husband. It protected her not only in battle, but also allowed her to stand up to her husband and his abusive behaviour. Here, the gun even becomes a positive symbol as it allows her to resist her violation.

*Guns and uniforms as symbols of success and legitimacy.* Lastly, guns and uniforms were introduced as tools that endowed both the combatants and the LRA’s actions with some kind of performance- and identity-based legitimacy. Carrying and wearing these military insignia meant to the combatants that they were real soldiers instead of marauding rebels. The steady supply of uniforms and guns affirmed that the LRA was ‘alive and kicking’, and acting as a proper armed force. Since uniforms were usually obtained in battles and encounters with other armed groups and enemy forces, they symbolised the LRA’s military success and ruthlessness. And they were also used as signs of individual success, as the most successful and respected commanders had access to more and better uniforms and guns.

### **Becoming a committed insider: Training, education and social learning**

Military training was part of all combatants’ initiation into life in the bush. At a minimum, it included learning how to handle a gun: how to shoot, dismantle and reassemble it. A number of interviewees also described being instructed on how to parade, march, greet friendly units, and take cover, and that they received physical training (see also Dolan 2009: 75). From their accounts, it seems that military training was more elaborate when the LRA stayed in one place for a longer period of time, but it often consisted merely of some basic instructions while being permanently on the move or during prolonged periods of fighting. Most training happened on the job: “things like dodging bullets; you just learn while doing it” (Gabriel, ll. 121–122). Training included both classical military training and guerrilla tactics: how to plan and execute an ambush, which goods are valued as lootables, how to communicate with other units by using high frequency (HF) radios (referred to as ‘radio calls’), how to confirm another group’s

identity to avoid friendly fire, how to take care of battle wounds, how to detect and spy on the enemy forces, and how to make a smokeless fire. Combatants also acquired a set of physical skills – most of all, walking for long distances. Alongside this more formal military training, they also learned a number of practical survival skills. These included how to construct trenches (*adaki*), how to cover their tracks so they wouldn't be followed, how to cross large bodies of water, and how to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. Whenever combatants stayed in one place for an extended period, they recounted that they spent much time in gardens cultivating crops. Some combatants also received some medical training on treating wounds or illnesses with both conventional medicine and herbs (Oloya 2013: 141–142).

While combatants often said that they did not learn any skills in captivity, some of them elaborated at length and not without pride on how they excelled at shooting exercises or endurance tests, reaped a rich harvest, or returned from combat without casualties. Where did this dedication to their tasks come from? Some interviewees argued that commitment was a requirement for survival; “because if I were not committed I would be the one to die” (George, ll. 620–622). Showing dedication in performing the assigned tasks both decreased the level of abuse and improved one's immediate living conditions, for instance, through access to better nutrition and health care and exemption from the most dangerous missions on the battlefield. But I would argue that there is more to it. As I see it, there is no shortcut from force to commitment. At least in the long run, sheer force is insufficient to explain why people complied with and even excelled at their assigned tasks. At some point, the combatants themselves had to find some internal motivation to do what they were expected to do. The question then is at what point external motivations become internalised, that is, when combatants not only comply, but commit.

Becoming part of the LRA did not happen only through initiation rituals (which challenged the new recruit in a rather passive capacity), but also through the incremental inclusion in its tasks, the acquisition of vital skills, and the mastery of all the physical and psychological challenges that came with it. In this stage of apprenticeship, both the acquisition of knowledge and the socio-emotional involvement in a shared task were vital for the new abductee to become, as Hundeide (2003) put it, a “committed insider”. People became more attached to the group as they showed commitment towards their given tasks. This task-bound commitment might initially or primarily have been a consequence of fear

of punishment. However, the interviews allow for the interpretation that many combatants became genuinely motivated to do a good job, to show some level of proficiency and mastery at what they were doing. This shouldn't be surprising; combatants do, as much as any human being, try to find meaning in their actions, and a degree of immersion in human activity, thereby connecting with others. Communities and organisations have always evolved around and made use of this genuine desire to connect, participate, and create. This might be even more true for communities like the LRA, which are less about finding the most talented and resourceful members and more about creating a certain level of commitment to the community as such. At the same time, training and education demonstrated to new combatants that the group was invested in their survival and future (Haer et al. 2011: 419–420). This may have incited expectations of reciprocity; combatants might have felt that they 'owed' it to their colleagues to try their best.

### Recruits and soldiers

What does it mean for combatants to be part of the LRA? When do they start to see themselves as soldiers? In their narratives, former combatants very clearly differentiated between new abductees (*kurut*, meaning recruit, or *mabuc*, meaning prisoner or captive) and genuine members of the LRA (*lamony*, meaning soldier, or *adwii*, meaning rebel, terrorist or enemy).<sup>15</sup> The high command encouraged such attitudes through the incremental and performance-based incorporation of new combatants into the everyday life of the organisation, i.e. its tasks, routines and benefits. During their first days and weeks, new combatants typically didn't have a lot of responsibilities. Basically, they were restricted to walking, giving directions and carrying goods. And they didn't have many privileges, as they had to eat separately from the rest of the group and were not allowed to carry a gun or to speak unless spoken to:

That time [right after the abduction] we stayed [in one place] for a week. While staying there we were not allowed to move anywhere, we were under strict custody for one week. Sometimes if you wanted to drink water and you asked, nobody would respond to it. You had to wait until someone reacted [...]. (Ivy, ll. 138–144)

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<sup>15</sup>On terminology, see also Oloya (2013: 95).

Some even describe being used as commodities:

When I had just been taken into captivity, we [I and my later co-wives] wouldn't relate easily. When it was raining during that time, they ordered me to sleep and act as a tent atop their bodies to guard them, to prevent rain from pouring on them. It would rain on me and they would mock me saying I was their tent. Even when you are sleeping someplace where rain can't reach you, you are forced out of the tent to go into the rain. (Scovia, ll. 289–299)

Before abductees became full members, they were often fair game; senior members didn't shy away from confronting them with burdensome requests, or physically abusing them without any prior offence, so they “develop that bad heart of torturing new recruits as well” (George, ll. 297–298). Offences were also punished more severely: “For abductees there is no punishment; they just kill you” (Simon, ll. 170–171). While the abuse of young girls by the head of their household or his wives was often sanctioned, many instances went unreported because people feared repercussions, and decided to stick it out:

I used to relate with them [my co-wives] very well. But for them they used to torture me so much. In most cases they overloaded me with work, such as washing their children. And if I refused they beat me up. [...] [O]ne time, I reported them to my husband. And he made them beat each other until they all beat each other. But after that I couldn't rest, I was tortured so much afterwards, so I never reported again. (Ivy, ll. 437–489)

Becoming a full member of the group meant to move up from such a position of powerlessness and routine abuse. Rituals of initiation – being registered as a soldier, getting a gun and receiving some military training – contributed to the incremental inclusion of new combatants into the LRA. While the assignment of a gun was the most visible and intuitive marker of their newfound combatant identity, their registration and training were central to alienating them from their civilian life and to initiating them into a new community. Moving up into the group from its peripheries, they learned and strived to ‘dance in the middle of the dance floor’<sup>16</sup>, trying to find a place they could handle, with regard to both what they were expected to do and what was done to them.

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<sup>16</sup>I owe this picture to my dear colleagues Philip Mader and Cornelius Moriz, who engaged it in a discussion on the rules of academic life.

### Receiving a rank

From the organisation's side, this process of becoming a full member of the LRA was not only secured through negative sanctions (most importantly, corporal punishment), but also through a system of positive incentives. To a large extent, these incentives hinged on the conferment of military ranks. The LRA's chain-of-command is almost an exact copy of the Ugandan army's system of ranks, with the following ranks in order of increasing authority: lance corporal, corporal, sergeant, sergeant major, second lieutenant, lieutenant, captain, major, lieutenant colonel, colonel, brigadier, and major general (Cakaj 2010: 7). Soldiers with a rank and personal responsibility for a troop were referred to as commanders, whereas soldiers without a rank were called privates. Though ranks were open to both male and female combatants, women typically didn't rise above the rank of second lieutenant or hold more responsible positions.

Ranks were for the most part based on seniority and performance on the battlefield, and were assigned or at least approved by Kony himself.<sup>17</sup> Promotion to a higher rank usually came with greater privileges and responsibilities. Commanders led a team of soldiers and abductees, and were typically protected by bodyguards. They commanded their team on the battlefield and in missions to loot and abduct, and had to ensure that no one escaped. They were authorised to make decisions about affairs concerning their unit (for instance, punishments, deployment in battle, and the distribution of looted goods), and only had to consult superiors for more far-reaching decisions. They could be punished if somebody under their command seriously violated one of the rules or managed to escape, or if they had too many casualties. Nevertheless, commanding a group was perceived as one of the perks of being a commander rather than a burdensome responsibility. Ranks were aspired to not as signs of bravery and badges of honour, but for what they made possible. They allowed combatants greater freedom of movement, personal authority over a group (instead of being pushed around at will by a senior commander), better protection, and, most importantly, access to better nutrition. Commanders got to choose the best food, especially meats like smoked chicken or beef. Higher-ranking commanders would set up their tents or houses closer to the centre of the settlement, where Kony and his entourage presided, and

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<sup>17</sup>See also Cakaj (2010: 7–8). For the highest ranks, promotions and demotions also happened for strategic reasons (Cakaj 2010: 9, Lancaster and Cakaj 2013: 15–16).

in the event of a sudden attack were better protected both through their location and by security personnel. On occasion, they were also allowed to listen to the radio, where many of them were confronted with often conflicting information on domestic politics and – perhaps most importantly – calls to return home.

Male soldiers with a rank were also allowed to stay with a wife,<sup>18</sup> and a varying number of domestic aides and babysitters (often referred to as *ting-ting*).<sup>19</sup> According to the interviewees, male combatants could either ask for a specific woman or be assigned to one. Their assignment was also status-related: “Once you have abducted women for wives, the commanders first get the beautiful ones. Only then the other soldiers can get the remaining ones, the remaining ones who are not beautiful” (Simon, ll. 87–91). Higher-ranking commanders were entitled not only to the most prized women, but also to multiple wives (Annan et al. 2009: 11–12). As *ting-ting* were usually turned into wives of the same commander who headed the household, and wives were supported in their duties by a number of *ting-ting*, senior commanders could have quite a large household. While male combatants often hastened to state that they had wives to help them with the household and other chores, the main attraction of having a wife seems to have been their availability for sexual activities. One female combatant described this kind of ‘appreciation’:

We went to a place where we were to celebrate Christmas. Kony was already having the girl we were abducted with as his wife. He had already had sex with the girl. One day, the girl was seated conversing with the man I was living with and she was listening from a distance. He [Kony] said, “*Jal*,<sup>20</sup> I see your wife looks as if she still is a complete whole, strong, bold and able-bodied. Have you worked on her [have you had sex with her]?” And Omona replied: “I will have her as my Christmas present.” (Janet, ll. 284–297)

Organisationally, ranks served as a reward and as a means to bind people to the LRA. A female combatant who was a wife to Kony for several years soberly commented on the use of these incentives: “We were only blindfolded [by the

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<sup>18</sup> Among the male combatants questioned for the Survey of War Affected Youth (SWAY), a survey of more than 1’000 households in northern Uganda conducted in the years 2005 to 2007, almost all of them stated having one or more wives in the bush (Annan et al. 2008: 42).

<sup>19</sup> *Tingo* means to lift or to carry; in a civilian context, it refers to the carrying of babies, i.e. being a babysitter. Its use is more widespread in the context of the LRA, where *ting-ting* were also in charge of a number of other, mostly household-related activities.

<sup>20</sup> *Jal* means fellow or friend; it is usually used to draw somebody’s attention.

ranks] so that we stayed in captivity. These praises were only to keep us longer in captivity. They were to relieve you of too many thoughts” (Scovia, ll. 641–644). While ranks were less about inclusion and more about distinction, they were, as such, a sign of the successful inclusion of individuals in the group. People didn’t get ranks by accident; they had to engage with and commit to the business of being a soldier, at least partially. The incremental and performance-based incorporation of new members into the LRA made combatants not only compliant, but complicit in their own initiation and socialisation as soldiers. While compliance can be guaranteed (at least in the short run) by force alone, complicity requires that the combatants became invested into their however limited choices.

### Summary

Abduction and recruitment into the LRA were described as events that broke radically with people’s everyday lives. Right from the beginning, new combatants were forced to prove their strength, resilience and unconditional obedience, and were subjected to high levels of violence. While compliance was initially a mere consequence of force, senior members made efforts to commit new recruits to the organisation through various means. In this chapter, I argued that commitment was created through a number of rituals of incremental inclusion or status passages. Through these status passages – initiation, getting a gun, and learning the business of waging war – combatants crossed the threshold from recruit to soldier. Their compliance with organisational demands was enforced not only through negative (force) and positive (rewards) sanctions offered by the LRA, but through a number of task- and group-related psychosocial dynamics that committed new combatants to the LRA. Combatants became invested as they tried not only to survive, but to learn the organisation’s rules, and to do a good job. The gratifications of becoming a “committed insider” (Hundeide 2003) helped combatants to see themselves as part of the group. As a consequence, I argue, for many, their focus shifted from trying to get out of the LRA to making the most of being in it. This shift is facilitated by organisational incentives and structures that forced combatants to pledge themselves to the LRA, and, thereby, to become quasi-members instead of remaining mere captives.

## **4.2 Finding the everyday in the extraordinary.**

### **Adaptation and resilience in violent lives**

#### **Abstract**

In the first analytical section, I have highlighted the role violence played in and for the initiation and socialisation of new combatants into the LRA. Through these ordeals, new combatants learn not only to live with war, but to reconcile themselves with a lifestyle that is characterised by the routine use of violence. That is not a minor accomplishment considering the magnitude of the transgression that violence constitutes. While concepts like the violation of a person's right to physical integrity are inventions of legal orders, the underlying premise that there is such a right to begin with is not. Prohibitions of killing are among the first norms in almost all societies. How do people manage to live with war and violence, and even in the middle of it, on the battlefield? How do they survive under these conditions not just physically but emotionally?

In this section, I will show how the integration of violence into everyday life, into routine action, allows for these processes of normalisation. The adaptation to violent lives, to "living with bad surroundings", as Finnström (2008) put it, is, as I argue, first and foremost not a symptom of the brutalisation and traumatising of forced combatants. Rather, it is proof of their resilience. Not only are combatants resilient or 'tough' in the face of harsh and inhumane living conditions, but they are able to carve out spaces of routine, comfort, and even enjoyment. The aim of this section is thus twofold: "to recover the sense in which everyday life is a practical accomplishment of the individuals" (Macamo 2006: 199), and to show how the organisation actively supports the combatants in their efforts to accommodate to their new living situation, and to create a sense of belonging to the LRA. In this sense, the creation of normalcy is both an individual and an organisational accomplishment. The organisation and its individual members pursue the same goal, but for different reasons: While combatants try to make life bearable for themselves, the LRA establishes structures and routines to exercise control and to bind people to the organisation.

#### **Like life at home: Repurposing cultural spaces**

Without fail, the presence of war breaks with civilians' everyday life and routines. Wherever possible, they try to adjust; they leave their houses at night to sleep in



the bush, avoid places that put them at risk, and try to obey the orders issued by the LRA (such as prohibiting the riding of bicycles). “Disaster strikes”, as Macamo (2006: 217) argues, when living with war becomes unpredictable; when there is no way to protect oneself from abduction anymore because it can happen anywhere, any time. So the idea that war and its disruptive effects only enter people’s lives when they are abducted certainly is misleading. Clearly, everyday life was already under pressure before the LRA arrived. But abduction broke even more with its fragile routines and structures. As I have shown, new combatants underwent a rapid and radical transformation from civilian to abductee to soldier. The detachment from their civilian life and identity was one of the most important goals of their initiation and socialisation into the violent group. At the same time, life in the bush was characterised by a high level of continuity with Acholi ways of living. This continuity was created by the integration of local traditions and institutions. These “repurposed cultural spaces”, as Oloya (2013: 75) called them, allowed combatants to maintain a sense of normality and sameness under the conditions of war and violence.

How combatants lived varied considerably depending on the time and location of the unit they belonged to. Some combatants described being permanently on the move, just resting for a couple of hours or a few days at a time to cook and sleep. As Samuel put it, “There was no home. Our home became the bush. We always kept moving in the bush” (Samuel, ll. 705–706). For them, keeping up with routines and traditions of civilian life was an uphill battle: “you sleep awake” (James, ll. 350). In contrast to these experiences of constant movement, the LRA built more permanent settlements in the bases in Uganda (Aruu, 1995–1997), Sudan (Gong, Luwudu, Palutaka, late 1993–1994; Rubagatek, 1998–2001; Nisitu and Jebelein, 1997–2002), and Congo (Garamba, 2005–2008) (Baines 2014: 37–38, Lancaster and Cakaj 2013: 14). These bases imitated Acholi villages, with regards to the set-up both of the settlements and of individual homes (Baines 2014: 4, Oloya 2013: 90). Whenever possible, people built traditional houses (*ot lum atota*). These were circular huts with a grass thatched roof and a low door made from wood or corrugated iron facing the compound (Oloya 2013: 90). Men and women stayed separately in the *otogo* (male house) or the *jokon* (female house), which often doubled as the kitchen (*keno*) and sleeping place for young children. Each senior commander’s hut (*gang madit* – main house) was surrounded by the huts of his wives and the *ting-ting* (Baines 2014: 4).

From there, “people lived a free kind of life” (Faith, ll. 487). While some

soldiers were sent to Uganda to loot, abduct and fight, for those who stayed in the camps, life was structured by routines and everyday activities. People spent their days working in the gardens they had planted, preparing meals, washing and mending clothes, fetching water and firewood, cleaning their weapons, attending prayer services and lectures, or just sitting around chatting. Everyday life was as exceptional as it was ordinary:

Where we stayed, we even had huts like this one. So life has not been easy sometimes. I used to dream that I was at home; sometimes it made me even forget that I was not at home. However, the situation in captivity was just like home, we had a normal daily routine. The same thing people do at home here is what we used to do there. [...] [After I woke up in the morning] I brushed my teeth and washed my face. If we could go to the garden then we went to the garden, and if we were not going to the garden, then we went to the well to fetch water and take a bath, before we started cooking. [...] In the afternoon sometimes we were taken for parade training. But if there was no training as day activity then we relaxed. (Prisca, ll. 222–248)

Sure enough, life was perceived as hard, but that didn't set it apart from life at home. In their narratives, combatants emphasised the continuity in their everyday life rather than its disruption. People would go about their daily lives as if war didn't define them: "When there were no battles, you lived like you were home there. But you would think about home when you were involved in battles" (Henry, ll. 717–720). Much like for civilians, war and violence were narrated as both omnipresent, as a background to their lives and a constant possibility that structured their routines and actions, and exceptional, as it only became immediate in battle, flight, and violent action that disrupted everyday life in the bush.

### **Everyday institutions and routines in a total organisation**

Throughout the interviewees' stories, it becomes clear that these efforts of making oneself at home, and finding some normality in 'bush life' were performed not only by individuals. Equally important for their process of settling in were institutions and routines which structured combatants' lives and, by imitating or mimicking civilian life-worlds, eased their transition into life in the bush. With institutions and routines that addressed legal, medical, intimate, religious, cultural,

and social affairs, combatants found both guidelines and reasons for action.<sup>21</sup> In what follows, I will outline how the organisation's provisions for every aspect of people's everyday lives helped them to adjust to their roles in the LRA.



Figure 4.1: The LRA's headquarters in South Sudan, late 1990s to early 2000s (sketch by a female former combatant, source: Dale 2012)

*Medical institutions.* Though there were exceptions, the combatants typically did not have access to civilian medical facilities like hospitals. Instead, they built their own: People who suffered from injuries or diseases and pregnant women were separated from the group and transferred to the so-called ‘sick bay’. Sick bays were located in relatively protected and hidden locations away from the battlefield (such as on top of a hill) and near a water source. From there, people were taken care of by using a mixture of traditional and conventional remedies until they were fully recovered and ready to take part in battles again. In some locations (for instance, in Juba), the combatants even had access to conventional medical care and hospitals, worked with trained medical professionals, and were provided with medicine. Some combatants also received basic medical training,

<sup>21</sup>I understand institutions in a broad sense, as structures and mechanisms that guide behaviour. In this definition, institutions encompass both formal (like schools or courts) and informal ones (like courtship or nursing practices). See also Chapter 1.2 starting on page 3.

in such skills as treating wounds, administering medicine, taking care of sick and injured people, and helping to deliver babies. Apart from the nurses and doctors in the sick bay, so-called ‘sanitation officers’ were responsible for maintaining high standards of hygiene among the combatants.

*Legal institutions: prohibitions and correctional facilities.* Organisational rules played an important part in combatants’ lives. According to the interviewees, the two most important rules were the prohibition of escape and adultery; both could be punished by death, and at least resulted in severe beatings if they became known. Another important rule was not to fight or quarrel, either with colleagues, spouses, or co-wives. Other rules were security-related: Fires for cooking had to be made without creating smoke, or during a fixed time slot (that coincided with the government forces’ cooking hours so as to provide a literal smoke screen); women had to take care that their children didn’t cry; moving units were mandated to cover their tracks on unpaved paths. These rules were enforced not only by corporal punishment, but also by the set-up of correctional facilities. These were usually constructed as underground prisons (*mabuc pa mony piny*, also referred to as ‘military’), that is, holes that were so deep that prisoners couldn’t get out by themselves, and that were secured by guards. Imprisonment was typically accompanied by the withdrawal of other privileges: Prisoners were often demoted and stripped of their gun. Male combatants could lose their right to have a wife. Distribution of food was often restricted, and prisoners had to ask and wait for approval to ease themselves. In short, they lost whatever limited privileges they had before. These underground prisons mimicked correctional facilities in civilian and military life, but also duplicated the situation of captivity. They reminded the combatants that they indeed had something to lose: namely, their recognition as persons. In this sense, imprisonment was not only a form of bodily punishment, but a means to debilitate and humiliate them.

*Religious institutions.* As I will argue later, religion played an important role in people’s lives, on both an individual and a collective level. There were also places reserved for holding prayer services (namely, *ot legga* – the house of prayers, or *kanica* – church). Prayers were sometimes ordered for those who stayed in the camps during periods of heightened fighting, in particular, young girls, who were considered pure. Prayers were at times combined with speeches, sometimes by Kony himself. These religious performances created some continuity with civil-

ian life,<sup>22</sup> in which both spirit beliefs and Christian practices coexist (Allen 1991, Behrend 1999: 100–127, Victor and Porter 2017).

*Social relationships: forced marriage, courtship, mourning and adultery* Intimate relationships among the combatants were strictly regulated, for different reasons. Male combatants, in particular young soldiers, weren't allowed to court women unless one of the senior commanders gave them permission or assigned them to a woman. Both men and women had to wait for approval of their union, although men more often had a say in who became their spouses than women did. Forced 'marriage' was at the same time a system of remuneration for the male combatants and a means of control. By limiting and sanctioning intimate relationships, the high command exercised control in different ways. First, these marriages created committed relationships that bound both males and females to the LRA. Second, as a form of institutionalised rape and abuse, forced marriage aimed at preventing internal struggles over women between the male combatants that could affect group morale and cohesion (Baines 2014, Kramer 2012). Third, as forced marriages were arranged upon sexual maturity of the female combatants, they were a means of controlling reproductive health, i.e. the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), particularly HIV. It seems that out of the many ways in which combatants died (in battle, or due to a combination of diseases or injuries, insufficient medical care and malnutrition), the LRA tried to control the ones they felt were in their hands. With regards to sexual health, they did so by abducting preadolescent girls and assigning them to male combatants in relationships of forced marriage. Lastly, as a system of remuneration, forced marriage also was a form of control that aimed at making male combatants compliant fighters. Consequentially, relationships outside of organisationally sanctioned marriages were strongly prohibited, even more so when the parties were in a relationship with somebody else. Forced marriage and the prohibition of adultery were two sides of the same coin: They were meant to bind members to the organisation and to prevent divisions between them. When a woman lost her assigned husband (in battle or due to a disease), a period of mourning was mandatory. Some women recounted that their heads had been shaved, and that courtship was only allowed once it grew back again (see also Otuko 2016: 139). Sometimes, they were allowed to choose a new husband for themselves, "so that you live a happy life. Because if they force you to be with someone you don't love it might cause a lot of problems" (Harriet, ll. 346–349). Regardless of whether spouses considered

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<sup>22</sup>Even though these rituals were, at times, also perceived as strange; see Victor (2011: 82).

their unions as legitimate marriages – the interviewees’ narratives show that many didn’t<sup>23</sup> – being married confronted both men and women with expectations on how to do justice to this status. Even though most unions were involuntary, it seemed natural to have an intimate relationship nonetheless,<sup>24</sup> at least for the male combatants.<sup>25</sup>

Within the LRA, institutions had different functions. For one thing, they allowed for functional differentiation within the larger settlements, and for their mobility: wherever combatants went, they had a blueprint for how to set up a working village. Second, their sheer existence gave institutions some pre-reflective legitimacy. Just because they were there and preceded most individual initiatives, people accepted them as given, and adjusted their actions to them. Such “basic legitimacies” (*Basislegitimitäten*), as Trutz von Trotha (1994b) called them, allow for “a recognition of the obvious that is as self-evident as is everyday life because it constitutes the everyday of domination”.<sup>26</sup> The power to make things happen, and to set orders into motion (*Organisationsmacht*) is one of the most potent sources of legitimacy. By making people follow their orders, and by supplementing these orders with institutions and routines, i.e. a complete universe of instructions on how to act, the LRA enjoyed a legitimacy that did not depend on approval of its actions.

Within these functionally differentiated institutions, people had jobs, i.e. they were assigned to specific roles and tasks. They were fighters, commanders or rank-and-file soldiers, babysitters, mothers and wives, and they fulfilled different war-related functions as signallers, rescue teams, night guards, bodyguards (*escorts*), or spies (*intelligence*). Other jobs were more relevant to the survival and daily activities of the group – such as the work as porters, farmers, cooks, sanitation officers, and midwives. These role identities are relevant here insofar as they

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<sup>23</sup>I will detail this in Chapter 4.5 starting on page 148.

<sup>24</sup>I refer to the forced marriages as intimate (instead of sexual or abusive) relationships because these marriages create a kind of commitment that goes beyond the women’s availability for sexual activities, and includes mutual obligations for the children’s and each other’s well-being (see also Aijazi and Baines 2017). However, this choice of terminology shouldn’t veil the mostly abusive nature of these relationships.

<sup>25</sup>A rare analysis of male perspectives on these forced relationships is Aijazi and Baines (2017). In their paper, the authors make a point that is also central to my argument: To understand how people can commit these acts, one has to take into account how they are embedded in the combatants’ life-worlds.

<sup>26</sup>Translated by the author; in the original: “In der Basislegitimität erfolgt eine Anerkennung von Evidenzen, die deshalb selbstverständlich wie der Alltag sind, weil sie den Herrschaftsalltag ausmachen” (von Trotha 2004: 67).

were also part of the creation of some kind of normalcy for the combatants.<sup>27</sup> The division of labour between those who fought and those who organised and managed everyday life for the others allowed for a smooth organisational routine, but it also influenced the mindset of individual combatants. Having a job meant having a sense of purpose that could be kept separate from questions about the overall legitimacy of the goals of the LRA, or their chosen means to achieve them. In this sense, roles, institutions and rules allowed for the organisation of everyday life under the conditions of war and its inherent unpredictability.

### **Suspending emergency: Enjoying oneself and sharing light moments**

Living with war and violence meant to live in a continuous state of alertness; it meant being prepared for disaster to strike anytime. Even in the most remote locations, fights could break out at a moment's notice, forcing combatants to pack and run, or to arm themselves and fight. How did they cope with this permanent state of emergency? The short answer to that is: they didn't; or rather, not in the sense that somebody unaffected by war would imagine. That is both because the sense of emergency was not ubiquitous, and because people couldn't have survived if they felt it was permanent. War gave its participants breaks as much as they had to give themselves breaks from it.

Although all combatants reported episodes of severe violence and hardship, most of them emphasised that life in the bush wasn't always like that. Many of them told us that there were times and places where they could and would enjoy themselves. Both in their daily lives and on special occasions, they would do so by dancing, listening to music, sharing stories and jokes, or just relaxing.<sup>28</sup> Ivy remembered:

Sometimes we used to have fun and you would feel like you were at home. Like one time we had a dance in captivity, we had radios that were looted from the population and then we used them. Dancing and listening to radios wasn't [usually] allowed, and if anyone was caught it would have been a problem. There was *Freedom FM* and

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<sup>27</sup>Role identities and identification were also relevant when it came to making their tasks, especially the perpetration of violence, accountable; I will talk about this in more detail in Chapter 4.4 starting on page 121.

<sup>28</sup>George, who became one of Kony's bodyguards, also recounted how they watched movies (mostly American war movies) on laptops powered by car batteries during the Juba Peace Talks (Cakaj 2016: 120).

the person who broadcasted on that radio station was Lacambel.<sup>29</sup> We would dance to traditional songs and sometimes there would be a competition held between the groups. (Ivy, ll. 867–880)

Interestingly, in this story, the looted radios are not a reminder of the deviant acts they were expected to perform, but a source of enjoyment: listening to music, dancing to its tune. The enjoyment is not even marred by the fact that the radio host is the same one who is known for moderating the ‘come back home’-messages intended to encourage combatants to escape. Here, the violations against civilians are not addressed as disruptive experiences, but become part of people’s everyday lives. As such, they lose their moral reprehensibility. Enjoying themselves, if only for a little while, allowed combatants to put up with the hardships they faced, to attribute positive value to their lives. In sharing stories and telling jokes, that is, by performing the vital tradition of storytelling (*bokko lok*; see also Oloya 2013: 3), combatants intermittently suspended the state of emergency they lived in. However, in most narratives, enjoyment was confined to a protected social space, in which war is distant enough not to disturb the illusion of ‘life at home’: “That [you can enjoy yourself] happens [only] when you are very deep in the jungle; that is when you can play some music” (Fred, ll. 228–230). Moreover, enjoyment was framed in specific ways to become a legitimate expression. It required emotional and narrative work to justify enjoyment, both in acting and talking about it.

Enjoyment was mostly attributed to activities off the battlefield, in which people blocked out the reality of living with war and violence for a while. But enjoyment or comfort could also come from the work as a soldier, i.e. from performing well on the battlefield and returning home victorious, as some interviewees argued:

What made me enjoy the work<sup>30</sup> was that sometimes we would win the battle and then some of the soldiers who had no guns in the beginning got a chance to own guns. And also if you desired to eat different

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<sup>29</sup>John Lacambel Oryema is a radio moderator with Mega FM in Gulu town. He is a popular figure since he broadcast the ‘come back home’ (*dwog paco*) messages, in which returnees addressed active combatants and encouraged them to return home. Though not all combatants had access to radios in the bush, many confirmed that the testimonies of former colleagues and friends assured them that it was safe to return, and that this motivated them to escape as well. A number of these recordings have been archived by The Voice Project: <http://voiceproject.org/radio-resources-volume-1-2>.

<sup>30</sup>By “work”, George refers to the tasks of looting from and abducting civilians. I will talk about the use of this term in Chapter 4.4 starting on page 121.



things they were there, for example smoked chicken, or maybe smoked meat. (George, ll. 628–635)

In George's account, enjoyment derived from doing a good job and being rewarded for it go together. Clearly, he was one of the more committed fighters I interviewed. For him, being on the battlefield was more of a positive challenge than a reality he needed to escape from. Still, sensual pleasure was inextricably connected to his overall positive attitude towards violent performances in the bush. What both accounts of enjoyment have in common is that their violent lifestyle is both present (in the radios looted from civilians and guns taken from fallen enemy soldiers) and invisible. It has to disappear, if only for a moment, if only from their narratives, to make their enjoyment possible. To enjoy life in the bush, people had to 'forget' the pain and suffering their actions caused.

### **States of belonging: Social identities, relationships, and solidarity**

In George's narrative of the emotional gratifications of being a fighter, another motif appears: namely, the importance of relationships with colleagues. Because armed groups are not just task-oriented but also socio-emotional groups, their social functions and the relationships between their members are vital to understanding individual combatants' engagement in them. Social relationships played vastly different roles in the interviewees' accounts. While some stated they didn't have any friends or confidants in captivity, most of them emphasised the importance of friendships. Some reported that they related well with their spouses and co-wives (so much that they cried over their loss, or took care of their children afterwards); others reported mistreatment, rape, and mistrust.

Men were more likely to describe their relationships with their given spouses as good. Women more often reported abuse, rape, and ruthless behaviour. Where women gave a positive assessment, they evaluated their relationship not in terms of affection, but of protection: "It [the relationship] was good because he took care of me" (Hope, ll. 380–381).<sup>31</sup> This sentiment is not unrelated to how people

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<sup>31</sup>That women's narratives typically go one way or the other – describing their husbands as either abusive or caring – might have to do with the desire to create narrative coherence or cognitive consonance (see also Chapter 4.4 starting on page 121). Moreover, where women saw their relationships as overall positive, instances of sexual abuse might have been experienced as less transgressive. In these cases, women often recounted only the first sexual assault as traumatising (Anett Pfeiffer Tumusiime, February 2016, personal conversation).

understand love and relationships in civilian life. Acholi love is less about the idea of romantic love that dominates Western discourses, and more about mutual care, respect, and shared activities and attitudes.<sup>32</sup> As such, it is a result of the efforts people put into the relationship rather than a contingent emotional state.

Sometimes, spouses built loving and caring relationships in which they shared their feelings and thoughts, and decided to escape or stay together. But more often, it was not their assigned spouses, but other soldiers (of the same rank), co-wives, and members of other households that became friends and confidants. Combatants often showed solidarity with others even if it put them at risk of severe punishment. For instance, several interviewees reported that they or others were punished for cooking unsavoury food, a mistake that commonly happened to new abductees who did not (yet) know how to cook, or how to prepare certain foods they got to know abroad. A typical punishment was to force the person to eat all the unsavoury food and drink a jerry can (typically, 10 litres) of water on top of it. Joyce recounted what happened to her:

Even I experienced it one day, in my case my sauce was well cooked but the problem arose when I was cooking *posho*<sup>33</sup> and firewood went out and it was raining. In captivity we used to cook in groups of maybe ten people, and when that thing happened to me some of the people I cooked with came and helped me. They took a huge share of the *posho* and left me with a small share only. And even the water I was given, they came and carried it away and poured it out, thus when the other rebel soldiers came and found that the *posho* was gone, and no water was there, they didn't do anything to me. There was some small portion left, but I pocketed it. (Joyce, ll. 627–643)

In some cases, those trying to help and support others by violating the rules had to suffer the consequences:

There was a lady who was a wife to Kony's escort; she is my cousin. At that time, she had just given birth to her firstborn, and they had nothing to eat. She asked me whether I have some food in the house and I said yes. I did just return from raiding and so I gave her five mugs of *sim-sim* [sesame] and five mugs of peas. But unfortunately

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<sup>32</sup>See p'Bitek (1997) and Porter (2013: 178–179); see also Chapter 4.5 starting on page 148.

<sup>33</sup>*Posho* (also known as ugali in other parts of Africa) is a popular Ugandan staple, typically made of maize flour mixed and boiled with water. It is served with meat or fish, sauce, and vegetables or beans.

these other girls who became wives to Odhiambo after me saw me [giving it to her]. And they reported me to the guy [who took care of me while Odhiambo was abroad]. He came and took me to a grass thatched hut where I was locked in and had to stay for one week without food. They gave me water but I refused to drink it. (Patience, ll. 520–535)

In her narrative, Patience emphasises her solidarity with her colleague and relative. Consequently, she also refused her punishment by rejecting the water, because she felt she did nothing wrong. In contrast, the fact that the food was looted from civilians – civilians who very possibly went hungry instead – isn't addressed as problematic. Here, one's own needs and those of one's primary group override moral inhibitions and even orders from the superiors. As Charity argued, "[T]hose rules [not to loot from and harm civilians] are also hard to follow. For instance, you are told not to enter the huts of civilians and not to steal anything from them, and at that time you are very hungry (*laughs*) (...)" (Charity, ll. 766–771). These examples show that solidarity among the combatants was seen as more important than that vis-à-vis civilians.

When reflecting on their time in captivity, some interviewees said that they miss the kind of community they shared with the other combatants. Often times, these relationships outlived their engagement with the LRA (see also Hopwood et al. 2008). Many of them stayed in contact and provided each other with emotional and sometimes material support – for instance, by taking care of each other's children. Some combatants (both male and female) choose to live with somebody they met in captivity (sometimes, but not necessarily their given spouses). Prisca explained why she decided to pursue a relationship with a man she met in captivity:

When I came back I found lots of bad things happening in Uganda, and lots of [HIV] infections. But for us who have been in captivity, we had those strong rules [concerning intimate relationships] and those rules really helped and kept us safe [from contracting STIs]. The kind of punishment given to us helped to limit the spread of the infection among the people in captivity. Most of all the people who have never been in captivity do not like us. They can relate with you but if they get a child from you they start to hate the children you returned with from captivity. They start calling these children rebels or Kony, and all kinds of bad things [accusations] are thrown at them. So to me I thought it is better I be with someone who has gone through the same thing I have gone through, and also in order to ensure my safety

health-wise. (Prisca, ll. 769–790)

Here, Prisca turns the stigma of being a former combatant into a virtue: because she and her colleagues learned to live with stricter rules regarding sexual relationships, she knows how to protect herself from contracting potentially life-threatening diseases. Apart from such rational (or rationalised) reasons for staying with their spouses or colleagues from the bush – the risk of contracting diseases, but also the challenges of taking care of joint children – combatants said that they felt more accepted and understood by them. They knew first-hand what they had gone through, and wouldn't confront them with fear, prejudice and insults. As a community of fate, the LRA gave rise to these close relationships even where it tried to undercut them (for instance, by forcing colleagues to punish each other or by separating those who appeared to be too close to one another).

### Finding solace in God

But even those combatants who struggled to make friends and felt rather isolated from their group of peers found sources of strength – most importantly, in their religious convictions. As noted before, it is a common misunderstanding that the LRA is a Christian fundamentalist terror group.<sup>34</sup> Rather, most Acholi are devout Christians (Baines 2010: 419, Ward 2001: 194), which was also visible in the rules and institutions of the LRA. Beyond these organisationally confirmed displays of religiosity, faith in God played an important role for many combatants before, during, and after their time in captivity. For instance, many interviewees tried to make sense of their abduction by seeing it as part of a divine plan:

Some time back if I thought of what I went through, I would cry endlessly. When I had just returned, I met those guys who abducted me and also killed both of my parents. If I think about it even now, I start to cry. It is even made worse when someone annoys me. Secondly, the colleagues I studied and grew up with nowadays are grown up, have good jobs and are educated. Meanwhile I didn't attend school as expected. At times when I think about it, I get sad but I know it was God's plan. (Faith, ll. 1633–1645)

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<sup>34</sup>The interpretation has also been refused by the Lord's Resistance Movement (LRM), the political wing of the LRA, in its statements; see Finnström (2008: 123–127).

Faith presents a sober analysis of her life through captivity. Her assessment is marked by missed educational opportunities, lost loved ones, and traumatic encounters. Still, she is able to console herself with the thought, the faith even, that her suffering is not meaningless: “I know it was God’s plan”. For many, their beliefs were a source of strength in difficult and threatening situations, both in the bush and upon return. One of the interviewees, Joan, recounted how her given husband nearly beat her to death because he suspected her of having an affair:

He fired a bullet that passed above my head. I was quiet and trembled strongly. He kept talking but I didn’t answer him, I was crying. I prayed in my heart that if it was my day to die then let it be it. I asked him to do whatever he was doing because God was watching his actions. “God doesn’t shift a person’s day to die. I will not respond to you and I will not say anything. I’ll only wait for your actions”, I told him. (Joan, ll. 599–609)

In Joan’s narrative, it was her faith that gave her the strength to handle the abuse and the prospect of possible death she faced. By confronting her husband with her belief in God’s authority, she both denied him the power to decide her fate and reminded him that he will be judged by God for his actions. Thereby, she resisted her subjugation through her husband to forces beyond their control. Faith was also very much present in people’s decision to escape, which they knew would put their life at tangible risk. Prisca, for instance, reflected on her decision to escape:

Life became so difficult, because fighting was intense. I had two children already. And the kind of beating I received there made me feel so bad. I told myself that even though I am going to die someplace, let me die, but I don’t want to be killed by them. The beating I received was because of this man who escaped, and I thought of leaving that place as well. But one thing I kept in mind was that there’s nothing and there’s no one above God. He made me be captured and brought in captivity, so he has a reason why he let that happen to me. (Prisca, ll. 687–700)

Not only did these religious convictions inform combatants’ narratives about their decision to return, they also strengthened their trust that they would return home safely: “So when it reached the day God had set for us to return, he opened the road for us and we left at 11 pm at night” (Hope, ll. 1347–1350). Here, the

faith in God becomes a means to handle a situation of existential uncertainty that cannot be controlled through other means; one simply *has to believe* that everything happens the way it is supposed to happen, and that it will, therefore, turn out well.

For the interviewees, their religiosity was not a way to abdicate agency by attributing it to a higher authority, but, as Sverker Finnström (2008: 201–202) and Letha Victor (2011: 84) have argued, a means of reclaiming a sense of control over their everyday lives. Seeing their experiences of abduction and life in the bush as part of a plan that exceeds their understanding helped them to survive their harsh living conditions and the arbitrariness of their experiences. In this sense, agency is not limited to physical acts, but importantly includes acts of meaning-making, through both their stories and their beliefs. As Oloya (2013: 69) argued, religion became important “as a source of personal strength rather than an instrument of control perpetrated through indoctrination”. Through their faith, former combatants found a means to make sense of and thereby to exert control over their life stories. Their faith helped them to accept their fate of abduction, to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty and personal risk, and to manage their lives upon return.<sup>35</sup>

## Summary

The interviewees’ narratives show how violence became part of their everyday lives, which continued despite and alongside to it. Why, and how, did combatants put up with this? I argue that their adaptation to and normalisation of violent lives was not only, and not even primarily, an effect of brutalisation or trauma, but also an effect of their resilience. This resilience is a protest against the hardships of life, “their insistence upon their right to live, to take up space, to take pleasure in the sentient world” (Scheper-Hughes 2008: 27). To do that, combatants commanded a number of resources that helped them to get used to their harsh and sometimes inhumane living conditions. They did so by temporarily lifting the state of emergency they lived in by finding sources of enjoyment: telling stories and jokes, dancing and singing, or just relaxing. Moreover, they found strength and emotional support in relationships with colleagues and friends, or by turning to God. At the same time, the organisation itself made efforts to make ‘bush life’ less extraneous and disruptive by establishing institutions and

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<sup>35</sup>I detail this argument in Chapter 4.7 starting on page 178.

routines that imitated life at home.

This creation of normalcy happens not only in people's violent pasts, but also in their speaking about them. People cope with the singularity of their experiences both situationally and after the fact, through their stories. In this sense, narratives are sense-making devices, which make the biographic rupture of their abduction accessible. They create continuity between their past and present selves. This continuity helps combatants not only in understanding their past, but also in mastering their present lives, where home receives a meaning different from their lives both before and during captivity.

## 4.3 Engaging with organisational demands: Agency in resistance and compliance

### Abstract

In the preceding chapters, I have argued that the process of immersion in the LRA posited a new and comprehensive reality of living with war and violence; a reality that was as exceptional as it was ordinary. It was, or rather became, ordinary because individuals, groups and the organisation itself strived towards making life in the LRA liveable for them. They made these efforts because there was no refuge, no retreat, from this reality. Just as for inmates of correctional facilities (or even more so), for the combatants there was no life beyond their involvement in the organisation's activities. And there was tight control over almost every aspect of it. In this chapter, I would like to argue that even though combatants were severely restricted in their actions, there were times and situations that allowed them to undermine the organisation's grip, and to make individual decisions. This scope for decision-making was created equally by the organisation and by the combatants themselves. In many cases, these opportunities for decision-making allowed combatants to negotiate their role in the organisation, and this could turn into a vehicle for their identification with these roles, their primary group, or even the LRA.

### Individual agency in a total institution

In many regards, the LRA is comparable to any other armed group. However, it is also different in important ways from many other armed groups and organisations more generally. When looking at combatants' agency, two determinants need to be taken into consideration: the organisation's mode of recruitment, and its total character. More than anything, the LRA is characterised by the forced recruitment of its members. Most combatants in the LRA didn't choose to pursue a 'career of violence' (Sutterlüty 2004) on their own terms. The involuntary nature of their participation was emphasised by many interviewees: "I never wanted this forceful kind of life" (Henry, l. 1306). Their forced conscription means that combatants understood themselves, at least initially, not as soldiers (*lumony*) or rebels (*adwii*), but rather as recruits (*kurut*) or prisoners (*mabuc*). Participation was a matter of gradually becoming, rather than being forced at once to assume, the role of a combatant. But it is not just the forced nature of the combatants' participation, but also the denial of their personhood and individual agency that



characterises the LRA as a total institution. From the organisation's perspective, the combatants were mere place holders identical with the functions and roles assigned to them. Their everyday life was structured by the routines prescribed by the leadership. But against these structural limitations, combatants found ways to live with war and the violence they experienced and co-created. Beyond sheer survival, they tried to make the best of it, and to carve out spaces of personal comfort. These efforts to improve their living conditions, and to gain control over their lives in the LRA, were part of the former combatants' agency.

What does agency mean for forced members of a total institution? Without doubt, their agency is different from that of those who join an organisation voluntarily, are free to leave at any time, and have a life beyond their institutional engagement.<sup>36</sup> However, even forced combatants command what Honwana (2000) has called 'tactical agency': the capacity to make choices that affect their immediate living situations. Combatants could and did make decisions on things that made a difference for them in the specific situations they found themselves in. These singular decisions served combatants in the short term, but could contribute to a course that worked against their long-term ambitions. For instance, combatants would try to excel on the battlefield to prove their value and to profit from better treatment; however, their employment as fighters might also have put them at greater risk of dying in combat. As they didn't know what their future might look like, combatants tried to make the best of the opportunities and choices within their reach. These micro decisions were a powerful means to cope with organisational expectations, and to reclaim a sense of agency against an environment that controlled almost every aspect of their lives.

What does this agency look like? Agency is visible where actors develop a stance towards their actions (forced or not), where they try to make a difference or even engage in subversive practices, where they "manipulate the events in an effort to turn them into 'opportunities'"<sup>37</sup>. It could be present in both acts of outright denial of and enthusiastic compliance with orders, and everything in between. In this understanding, agency includes strategies of (hidden) resistance (*Strategien der Widerständigkeit*, von Trotha 1994a,b), of open or covert non-

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<sup>36</sup>Although, in most cases, people are faced with situations somewhere in between deliberate choices and situational pressures (see for instance Honwana 2006, Richards 2008, Utas 2003, Vigh 2006).

<sup>37</sup>Translated by the author from the French original, where the full sentence reads: "Comme de Certeau le montre très clairement, la tactique est bien l'art du faible qui doit constamment manipuler les événements dans l'objectif de les tourner en 'opportunités'" (Honwana 2000: 75).

compliance through inefficiency, calling in sick or pretending to lack talent on one side of the spectrum, and cooperative strategies of preemptive obedience, dedication and zeal on the other side. As Baines (2009) has argued, combatants resisted and dealt with orders as they ‘played stupid’ or ‘played smart’. By consciously undercutting or exceeding organisational expectations, they exercised agency. In doing so, combatants did not just passively react to an organisational impulse (such as the threat of violence), but actively engaged with the organisational demands. They acted instead of, or alongside, being acted upon. In what follows, I will detail a few of these strategies of exercising agency under the conditions of (almost) total organisational control.

### **Subversive practices: Hidden and open resistance**

From the interviewees’ narratives, it seems that combatants only rarely openly resisted commands. Typically, they gave one of two reasons why: either they had already experienced being harshly punished for it, or they had witnessed others being punished for non-compliant behaviour. Often times, witnessing or experiencing punishment was sufficient to discourage them from open resistance later on. Rather, they tried to circumvent the rules and commands secretly, without anyone noticing. These strategies of hidden resistance were a central element of the combatants’ exercise of agency. They often went unnoticed because, in contrast to mutinies,<sup>38</sup> they didn’t have to be organised and coordinated among the combatants (von Trotha 1994a: 431). Every breach of a rule was enforced through the initiative or inaction of a single person. However, strategies of hidden resistance often became shared patterns of behaviour. In this section, I will highlight a few of them.

Upon abduction, most combatants already had a rough idea about the LRA’s actions and identity. This picture was nurtured by first-hand experiences, reports and rumours. Among these was the knowledge<sup>39</sup> that the LRA violently retaliates against those who attempt to escape and their home communities. The interviewees entered the LRA with such knowledge, and it also informed their actions

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<sup>38</sup>Which is why mutinies are rare events that often point to a weakened leadership; for reports of mutiny in the LRA, see Cakaj (2015a).

<sup>39</sup>By knowledge, I refer all states of knowing that not only are based on valid arguments, but includes all information that informs people’s attitudes and actions, such as own and relayed experiences, rumours, and knowledge that has been passed on (see also Berger and Luckmann 2007).

upon abduction. A couple of combatants admitted that they tried to mislead the LRA about their identity right from the start, for instance, by introducing themselves with a made-up name, like Faith did:

I changed my name. I didn't tell them my real names. There was a boy – I was older than he was – who told me not to tell them my real names for the reason that if I had told them my real names, they would find ways to go to our home and kill my parents. He was just being childish. So I asked him what name to use, and a colleague of mine said I should be called Julie. They later started calling me that name.<sup>40</sup> (Faith, ll. 221–232)

Combatants told us that they used a pseudonym, and that they sometimes even lied about their homestead to protect themselves, but also their families and communities from retaliatory action. Choosing to do so was perceived as a risky strategy. It was not uncommon for combatants to meet later on acquaintances or family members, who could have uncovered their lie. It was, in sum, a bet with high stakes. However, hiding their identity and descent became a means to deal with rumours, reports and threats of violence against their communities and families. And it was also a strategy to protect themselves from harm. For instance, Joyce recounted how she managed to escape once, but was abducted for a second time afterwards. Although she was not re-abducted by the same unit, she chose a new name for herself so she wouldn't be detected and punished for escaping before.

Moreover, the interviews show that combatants made decisions on their places and roles in the organisation, most visibly in the realm of intimate relationships. Though there were no direct orders to procreate, building a family was encouraged and expected (Baines 2014, Kramer 2012).<sup>41</sup> Some combatants secretly resisted these expectations for different reasons. Janet, for instance, recounted how unhappy she was when she found out she was pregnant. For her, the pregnancy meant that she wouldn't be considered for fighting missions in Uganda anymore, a task that came with the chance of finding an opportunity to escape. As she saw her pregnancy as an obstacle to her return to civilian life, she tried to terminate

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<sup>40</sup>Many interviewees described how, upon abduction, other recruits advised them on how to deal best with the expectations of the organisation, and how to avoid corporal punishments. These acts of kindness, solidarity and friendship are discussed in Chapter 4.2 starting on page 90.

<sup>41</sup>I will discuss this in more detail in Chapter 4.5 starting on page 148.

the pregnancy:

I felt I should have lived without the pregnancy because they would select people from Sudan to come to Uganda. When they went to Uganda, we would hear they escaped back to their homes. So I felt if I hadn't been pregnant I would have been selected to be among the *standby*<sup>42</sup> and would have gone to Uganda. It would have been possible to escape like my other colleagues did. I didn't like the pregnancy. I tried to abort the child when it was four months old [when I was four months along]. I tried so hard to abort but George [my assigned husband] couldn't accept me to try everything. (Janet, ll. 649–663)

By deciding that she didn't want to bear a child in captivity, Janet put herself at risk both for punishment from superiors and for potentially life-threatening complications from an unsafe abortion. She took this risk, as she argued, because she didn't want this potential route for escape to close.

For some, pregnancy and motherhood felt like a burden; a further barrier to returning to civilian life, and a responsibility that was even harder to manage considering their youth and the living conditions in the bush.<sup>43</sup> While most couples went on to have children anyway (provided there was no fertility issue), some, like Charles, consciously decided to avoid parenthood:

That one we [my wife and I] decided together and agreed not to have any children; we realised the lifestyle in the bush is very hard for raising children. Because there I witnessed [what happens if] you have your child immediately (...) you should know that child is going to be very astute. It is a young goat born in dry season, that goat just after a week will want to begin to climb [mount] the mother, it wants to go and do anything. [...] So the children who are born in the bush are like that, they start to carry guns when they are just this size (*shows with his hands*), and these young children are the worst and most dangerous in the bush. When they are sent to fight a battle (*raised voice*), they finish the UPDF (*reduced voice*). They aim very well because they are used to holding guns. They have guns with them all the time like something to play with. If they don't fight they are not happy. (Charles, ll. 1196–1221)

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<sup>42</sup>Those who were selected as standby soldiers were not assigned to a specific mission, but were supposed to wait for orders from superiors to move and act. Being among the *standby* came with the possibility of fighting and moving across borders.

<sup>43</sup>I will talk about this in more detail in Chapter 4.5 starting on page 148.

Charles offered an elaborate narrative on his (and his spouse's) decision to avoid pregnancy: not only is “the lifestyle in the bush [...] very hard for raising children”, but it is also seen as detrimental for their moral development. In his perception, children born in captivity couldn't tell right from wrong, and, as a result, didn't have any inhibitions when it came to the use of violence.<sup>44</sup> Consequently, Charles and his wife (successfully) avoided pregnancy and parenthood. They did not abstain from intercourse, though, but seemingly used some kind of rhythm method: “You know there is a specific period for pregnancy [...] So if I knew it was this period for getting pregnant, I did not do anything” (Charles, ll. 1272–1276).

Some female combatants, though, had a more positive perception of the changes that pregnancy and parenthood meant for them. In contrast, they emphasised how their pregnancy and motherhood alleviated their living conditions: expecting women and mothers weren't obligated to participate in battle, received better care and protection from casualties, and were to be treated with respect.<sup>45</sup> Women and men narrated how they either sought or tried to avoid pregnancy and parenthood, depending on their personal evaluation. While resistant couples could quite easily get away with such a decision – provided no one knew the assumption would be one of them was infertile – former combatants said it was more difficult to hide resistance to other, more explicit expectations and tasks, such as on the battlefield. The interviewees felt differently about opportunities or requests to participate in battles. While some, like Janet, saw them as an opportunity to escape, others tried to avoid participation by all means. Joyce, for instance, admitted how she dreaded those requests: “I was a coward” (Joyce, ll. 379–380). Some volunteered, but others tried to resist imperatives to fight. A common strategy was to pretend to be too sick to support the fight: “I could pretend that I was not feeling well; I would tell them that I was feeling some abdominal pain. If they asked me of what I ate, I would tell that I ate the normal sauce and some millet bread” (Herbert, ll. 1201–1206).

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<sup>44</sup>The same judgement was made by a number of combatants about preadolescent combatants more generally: “As adults, there were some things you would try to dodge from doing, unlike children who did everything they were commanded” (John, ll. 1927–1931). Here, the interviewees also make claims to a self that children born and raised in captivity cannot access since they are not (as firmly) grounded in a civilian identity. Thereby, the interviewees distance themselves from those young combatants who are portrayed as being capable of atrocious acts because they don't know right from wrong. I will elaborate on this narrative strategy in Chapter 4.4 starting on page 121.

<sup>45</sup>I will detail this in Chapter 4.5 starting on page 148.

Former combatants also described how they occasionally avoided participation in unpleasant tasks by creating a diversion. Asked whether they ever had to participate in the punishment of anyone, Prisca and Joyce recounted how they avoided these tasks where possible:

Well it is like this; if someone did something wrong, for instance one time there was a girl who tried to escape and she was brought back. I didn't face her directly, I dodged giving her the punishment, but if you want to dodge you have to be very smart. [...] The man I used to stay with never allowed me to go where people congregated. These congregations were full of new people, and if you are caught escaping, they take you there and they ask the newly abducted people to punish you. The punishment involves beating and sometimes even killing. But for me when people were there I got my jerry can or axe and went to fetch water or firewood in the jungle. That's how I have been dodging. (Prisca, ll. 444–467)

There was one time (...) I and six other women were picked to go and punish a girl who tried to escape and was caught. I told those people that I was going to defecate and I then took very long there. When I got back I was told to go and beat the girl too. But the good thing was that a certain commander showed up and told me to go and boil water for treating her [instead]. (Joyce, ll. 653–661)

From these narratives, it becomes clear that combatants were well aware that they had to decide carefully when to try their luck. As Prisca explained, “[I]f you want to dodge you have to be very smart”. Strategies of hidden resistance could always backfire and lead to severe punishment if they were discovered by superiors.<sup>46</sup> Sometimes, combatants chose a highly probable punishment over the assigned task; but often, this wasn't a wise strategy since they would have had to perform the task anyway.

A number of female interviewees also described how they resisted abuse from their assigned husbands. While there was no explicit order to obey their spouses' demands, resistance to sexual advances could be a risky strategy, depending on how much abuse they were expected to take, and how much authority their assigned husbands had to discipline them. Female combatants recounted that they were usually unsuccessful in defying sexual abuse (as they were expected to

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<sup>46</sup>As was the case for Scovia, see page 75.

have intercourse with their spouses), but sometimes they succeeded in protesting against other forms of physical maltreatment. Joan, for instance, recounted how her husband tried to kill her for reasons of jealousy, and was punished and separated from her when she reported the abuse to his superiors. Open displays of resistance like this were perceived as particularly risky and only rarely pursued by the combatants.

In contrast, the interviewees' narratives show that expressions of hidden resistance pervaded everyday life in the organisation; "resistance is a daily struggle"<sup>47</sup> between those in charge and the rank-and-file combatants. It is one of the most powerful "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1985): These forms of resistance are not disruptive, but continuous (von Trotha 1994a: 431); and there is no need for them to be organised. Thereby, they evade the institutions that aim to undermine organised resistance and solidarity among the combatants. Through acts of hidden resistance, combatants responded to the perceived omnipotence of the leadership and its orders. Combatants lied – or, rather, resorted to "defensive communication" (von Trotha 1994a: 434–439) – to handle questions where they couldn't assess the consequences of their answers, or where they feared honesty would hurt them. They evaded ever so secretly the organisation's expectations of family life where they felt these put new constraints on them. They resisted participating in tasks that contradicted their moral convictions or put them at risk. In doing so, they took care of themselves and others, trying to avoid physical and psychological harm. Many of these efforts were, in fact, attempts to limit the organisation's level of control over them. By lying about their homestead, for instance, they resisted the detachment from their families and communities that lies in the credible threat of retaliatory action against them. By avoiding pregnancy, they resisted their further immersion in the group through building and becoming a family. While the leadership tried to block their routes for return and to make the bush become their new home, many interviewees actively obstructed this process and thereby distanced themselves from the organisation.

Interestingly, these strategies of hidden resistance mostly corresponded to a narrative of unconditional obedience. The interviewees rarely admitted to deviant acts when asked head-on if they had ever acted against the rules.<sup>48</sup> However, combatants did recount instances of hidden resistance, only they didn't define them

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<sup>47</sup>Translated by the author from the German original, which reads: "Widerständigkeit ist ein alltägliches Gegeneinander" (von Trotha 1994a: 431).

<sup>48</sup>This observation has also been made by Baines (2016: 27).

as such. One reason might be that such an admission would have somehow questioned the narrative of the LRA as an omnipotent organisation, a narrative the combatants themselves had become invested in because it supported their claims to victimhood. At first inspection, this proposition seems to be at odds with the idea of agency. But to make experiences of victimisation an important and driving element of their narratives is part of the storytelling agency of the combatants. By using their experiences of powerlessness and forced action to tell their stories, they, in fact, exercise agency. Utas (2003: 22) has referred to this agency of presenting oneself as a victim as “victimcy”. Victimcy allows combatants to cope with the ambiguous experience of having been drawn into war and violence, where they were forced to make challenging decisions.<sup>49</sup> Here, their narratives also become a means to rewrite the past by fitting it into a unified narrative, i.e. one that reconciles their present with their past.

### **Cooperation as agency: Practices of active compliance**

Agency was present not only in acts of deviance, but as much so in acts of active compliance. By active compliance, I refer to acts of compliance that are not only motivated by fear, necessity or a desire to conform, but by a conscious decision to comply. Where compliance becomes more than sheer obedience, the extrinsic motivation of individuals becomes intrinsic. Combatants would not only follow orders, but also contribute to the organisation’s goals and anticipate their superiors’ expectations. In short, they tried to make their lives easier by making the organisation’s rationale their own. This active compliance did not necessarily rest on positive identification with the tasks at hand – though that certainly happened – but an understanding that they would somehow profit from complying with orders, and, as a consequence, at times they even showed ambition. Among such strategies of cooperation, two themes repeatedly surfaced in the combatants’ narratives: (1) becoming a wife and mother, and (2) getting a rank.

Apart from some of the ‘originals’ who became part of the LRA in its early years, the female combatants typically didn’t have a choice whether they wanted to become a wife (Baines 2014: 5). Among the female combatants I interviewed, all were assigned to a male combatant at some point.<sup>50</sup> But to a limited degree,

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<sup>49</sup>I will talk about these narrative strategies of coping in more detail in Chapter 4.4 starting on page 121.

<sup>50</sup>See Table 1. This is confirmed by analyses of larger samples; see Annan et al. (2008: 40).



female combatants could influence the point in time when they transitioned from *ting-ting* to wife (Baines 2014: 10). Depending on their experience and evaluation, female combatants tried to either speed or slow the process of becoming a wife. For instance, they would hide their first menstrual bleeding (that indicated they were ‘ready’ for marriage), or proactively engage with a man to encourage their union. Some female combatants, for instance, agreed to marry a senior commander to profit from his protection and care (Baines 2014: 9). Married and pregnant women in particular recounted that they received more reliable and generous nutrition and medical care and didn’t have to perform tasks on the battlefield anymore (see also Baines 2014: 5, Victor 2011: 73; for Sierra Leone, see Park 2006: 327). Young girls often understood marriage as a means to escape their abuse by senior wives (Baines 2014: 11). Moreover, some of them reported that they could influence who became their later companion (Baines 2014: 5).

For the women, an important part of becoming a wife was being subjected to their husband’s sexual demands. More often than not, intercourse was forced, even where women strongly defied their husband’s advances. In most cases, however, combatants ultimately complied with these demands due to experiences of abuse and fear of corporal punishment: “you only persevere so that you don’t get killed” (Faith, ll. 1279–1280). Many female interviewees described how they put up resistance to their sexual abuse at first, but gave in once they saw that their resistance only led to more threats and physical abuse. These acts and considerations show that compliance is not just a reflex, but the result of a decision process, albeit one with limited options.

But maybe the most important means to improve one’s living situation was to aspire to a ranked position. Though interviewees told us that there was an element of caprice to it, ranks were mainly based on seniority and bravery on the battlefield. Combatants could work up to them, and many of them did. A lot of combatants confirmed that receiving a rank gave them some peace of mind. For instance, combatants who held a rank were not suspected of trying to escape (at least not without giving some indication), which meant they were threatened and monitored less closely. They described not being pushed around by the senior commanders anymore, and having some, though clearly limited, room for making decisions: “when you are a commander, [...] everybody follows your command. Anything I wanted to do be done was done” (Isaac, ll. 120–123). In contrast, as new combatants, not only were they excluded from these privileges, but their actions were judged more strictly; as Simon said: “For the abductees [who com-

mit an offence] there is no punishment, they just kill you” (Simon, ll. 170–171). People with a rank, however, were treated as equals, and as valuable assets to the LRA whose lives wouldn’t be put on the line for a minor transgression, just to set an example for others. They became, as Oloya (2013: 107) argued, *dano adana*, worthy human beings.

Concurrent with the risk of being targeted by colleagues, the risk of dying from war-related causes also declined. Combatants with a (higher) rank were usually exempted from particularly dangerous jobs like fighting at the forefront of the battle, or being part of the bomb disposal unit. By aspiring and receiving a rank, combatants also realised some freedom of movement. They were entitled to carry a gun or even an arsenal of weapons that offered them at least some protection, and were often also protected by escorts or guards. Since they received more nutritious or generous rations of food, they were less affected by malnutrition, and suffered less severely from simple diseases like diarrhoea because they were in a better general state of health. Moreover, they were included when strategic information was shared or decisions made, which could also affect their chances of survival.

### Individual agency and organisational control

Though combatants were subjected to high levels of violence, they were anything but helpless victims of or passive bystanders to their fate. Through acts of both resistance and compliance, combatants rejected the LRA’s claim to total control over them. Why does an organisation that lives on a reputation of omnipotence allow for what seem to be control deficits? Why does it tolerate and even encourage displays of individual agency when it seems to be invested in proving to the combatants that they are powerless and replaceable? First, coercion can only achieve so much. Exercising power by force alone is limited both in its reach and in its efficiency; ‘power of action’ (*Aktionsmacht*) doesn’t threaten those who are out of the leadership’s reach, and violent threats have to be reinforced continuously to retain their power (Popitz 1992, Schlichte 2009). So one reason why the LRA allows for displays of individual resistance is *because it has to*. It would be too cost-intensive to monitor and sanction every little transgression. But more importantly, from an organisational perspective, such attitudes to coercion can become functional. *It’s not a bug, it’s a feature* – or rather, it’s a bug that turns out to also be a feature. That is because the exercise of agency on the part of the combatants resolves the conflict between forced recruitment and the need for

commitment. Because combatants were given some leeway in decision-making, they were compelled to identify with the LRA, because they felt that they had some say in the role they would play. By including individual combatants in decisions that were about them, the leadership managed to transfer accountability for violent actions, thereby making forced combatants complicit (see also Kühl 2016: 71–73). In this sense, control deficits served the same aims as rituals of incremental inclusion: they compelled combatants to commit to the organisation through affirmative actions. This is not to say that control deficits were a deliberate strategy for creating commitment, but that they had latent functions (Merton 1957) that may have overridden their disruptive effects.

This idea is key to understanding the rationale behind some of the rituals that the LRA performed: for the combatants, they created the illusion of being in a position where they could influence their fate. In this sense, agency was not just a tool of self-empowerment for the combatants, but a means to create allegiance to the organisation. One of these rituals is the assignment to a spouse, as Ivy described it here:<sup>51</sup>

I was made a wife. All the new captives who were female were forced to remove their shirts, and then they take you to where new shirts are. And when you pick any blouse from there you just know that you have picked a man for yourself with that shirt. And there is no way you can resist it. After that, they tell you that the shirt you have picked belongs to your husband. (Ivy, ll. 291–300)

Ivy describes two seemingly contradictory things: how she “was made a wife” by “pick[ing] a man for herself”. Becoming a wife is something that happens to her, but also through her: after all, she is the one who picks up a particular shirt, the shirt that belongs to the man who will become her husband. Why were spouses assigned in this manner? Clearly, it won’t be based on a conviction that the random assignment of spouses leads to the most sustainable unions. Partly, as I argued in Chapter 4.1, such procedures are demonstrations of power: the LRA does this because it can, and because it wants its members to know it. But that’s only part of the story. By giving combatants some false authority to make choices – choices that are not genuine because they offer only equally bad alternatives, or because they preclude informed decisions – the LRA impli-

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<sup>51</sup>This procedure has also been described by Annan et al. (2008: 40–41) and Victor (2011: 72).

cates its members in the things that happen to them. By exercising fake choices, combatants become complicit in their fate. Many of the decision processes combatants described follow a similar pattern, and have to be understood as means of control rather than as transferrals of authority or dysfunctional control deficits.

Individual agency could also play out more directly, as compliance with organisationally prescribed routes for promotion that potentially gave combatants leeway to make genuine decisions. To be sure, rising in the ranks was not expected, and many combatants survived without committed action, by following orders and trying not to attract any attention, positive or negative. Still, organisational incentives to excel were pretty high. Interviewees who had a rank described how they enjoyed a number of privileges when it came to the distribution of food, personal security, freedom of movement, and living arrangements. Apart from the material incentives offered for cooperation and dedication, combatants argued that promotions allowed them to make decisions on things that mattered to them, for instance, by releasing individuals and sparing one's home area from attacks:

[To do so,] [y]ou needed to have a rank. If you didn't, you wouldn't be able to safeguard your home area. [...] You wouldn't be listened to. If you had a rank, you would be listened to. If someone was abducted from your village, as a commander, you had the right to release that person at your own wish. He could tell such an abductee to go back home. (Samuel, ll. 818–831)

In part, such statements can be read as self-serving declarations, as attempts to reinterpret opportunistic aspirations as heroic actions. Still, the sense of empowerment they portray is instructive: being in a leadership position allowed combatants to do things on their own initiative, i.e. to choose the means they saw as appropriate to realise a particular goal, and to enforce their ideas of just action. These liberties were not just privileges, but they also had a symbolic meaning for many combatants. They meant that the leadership trusted them not just not to escape, but to successfully lead units and missions; to be, in short, good fighters. This trust in the combatants' capacities as soldiers often instilled some sense of pride and self-value in the combatants that pervades many of their narratives, especially those of higher-ranking combatants.

In this sense, the violent demands of the organisation double as sources of identity and power (see also Honwana 2006, Richards 2008). By choosing their

level of participation, combatants committed to the project of the LRA, at least partially. They came to perceive themselves as powerful, and their decisions as a result of who they were. John, for instance, attributed the assignment of a rank to his kind nature and his capacities as a fighter (John, ll. 1216–1289); Henry attributed it to his being “strong-hearted” (Henry, l. 673). In his study on youth in the Liberian civil war, Utas (2003: 53) has argued that the participation of many young women and men in civil wars can be understood as “an active move towards power and influence”. To pick up the gun and fight allowed them to seize opportunities not available to them in civilian life. This argument still holds true, I argue, under the conditions of forced recruitment. While most combatants joined the LRA by force, motives for retention may not be based on violent threats alone. Combatants’ decisions to stay, or their indecisiveness about seeking out chances to leave, were based on mixed motives (including existential, opportunistic, and value-based motives). In a context where civilian life is perceived as humiliating and debilitating, participation in war and violence can feel empowering even for those who never chose, or never would have chosen, to fight in the first place.

### Summary

Reading the abundant stories of how everyday life in the LRA was marked by force and the threat of it, one might get the impression that combatants were devoid of agency, that they were nothing but “empty vessels into whom violence was poured” (Honwana 2006: 73). But the fact that combatants were severely limited in their alternatives for action did not preclude them from engaging with the organisation’s violent demands. This engagement could result in different strategies for action: combatants could either try to resist these expectations (openly or secretly), or follow or even master the rules of the game. These strategies of resistance and cooperation were not mutually exclusive. The interviewees’ narratives confirm that they engaged in one or the other depending on the situation and their perceived opportunities for action. But why do these opportunities for decision-making and the combatants’ agency matter?

First of all, they change the discourse. Much of the research on young combatants and involuntary participation in civil war has addressed its protagonists as mere victims, thereby precluding questions of agency, complicity and accountability in violent actions. It is these questions that resurface in the aftermath of violent conflict and in confrontations with the civilian communities that suffered

from their actions, and that need to be addressed to overcome the conflict's legacy. Second, while passive compliance might be the predominant mode of action, it is the combatants' agency that offers an important key to understanding why and how they participated in war and violence for reasons that went beyond the use of force. By trying to make the organisation's rules work for them, combatants became (subconsciously) complicit in their fate. This dynamic might provide another clue to understanding how combatants lost sight of their long-term objectives – most importantly, to escape – and focussed on “mak[ing] our lives a little better” (Prisca, l. 319), on making the most of living in and with the LRA instead.

At the same time, these acts of resistance and renegotiation can be understood, as Baines (2016: 30) has suggested, as “ongoing contestations of what a human life is worth”. Talking about their agency also confronts the interviewees with a narrative challenge: while they object to their portrayal as completely powerless actors, the admission of too much agency confronts them with questions of accountability: Why didn't they escape (earlier)? Why did they comply with violent demands? These questions will be further addressed in the next section.

## 4.4 ‘Me, I am not a killer’: Linking and decoupling identity and action

### Abstract

One of the biggest challenges the interviewees faced throughout their engagement with the LRA, and upon their return to civilian life, was to make sense of their experiences in the bush, or more specifically, of their participation in war and violence. How do they understand themselves as actors in armed conflict? What do their actions mean for their sense of self and their identities? In this chapter, I show how combatants cope with violent action and identity by means of their narrative, that is, how violence became part of their stories. I argue that combatants at least partially manage to cope with the conflict between their claimed moral selves and their immoral actions by negotiating and resolving them narratively, in both the past and the present. I will identify and detail two overall strategies: (1) to distance oneself from one’s violent identity, and (2) to commit to this violent (role) identity in one way or another. These two strategies are not mutually exclusive, but may overlap in individuals. In sum, they help combatants to make sense of themselves and their actions. They also provide a key to understanding how combatants can both resist immersion in the LRA and become committed fighters after all.

### Decoupling identity and action: Techniques of neutralisation

This chapter builds on the premise that combatants strive to be, and to be acknowledged as, good persons. Indeed, the stated internal conflict only exists if people feel conflicted about their transgressions and their moral implications. I argue that this premise does not only hold true for former LRA combatants who – by the forced nature of their engagement – are no more prone to violence than any other person. In fact, almost every person tries to be good, even while purposely committing crimes. As Sykes and Matza (1957) have shown, the idea that delinquents and other criminals reject values commonly held by society, such as honesty or abiding by the law, is faulty. The criminologists argue that the morals of people engaging in crimes don’t differ from those of the ordinary person – with one important caveat: They are convinced that their actions are not violations of this moral order. Delinquents understand that the misdeeds they are accused of are just that – except that, in their particular case, they are exempted, justified, or negligible. These argumentative techniques ‘neutralise’ the reprehensible

quality of their offences. They allow delinquents and other criminals to reframe their deviant behaviour in a way that it does not harm their self image as decent persons. The authors identify five such “techniques of neutralization”: (1) *denial of responsibility*, (2) *denial of injury*, (3) *denial of the victim* (i.e. their victimhood), (4) *condemnation of the condemners*, and (5) *appeal to higher loyalties*. I will quickly introduce these techniques before exploring their relevance for the study of combatants’ narratives.

(1) Delinquents might admit to deviant acts, but *deny personal responsibility* for them. They will argue that the actions or the resulting harm were not intended, or blame their actions on socialisation, bad influences, or structural incentives. By positioning themselves as being “more acted upon than acting” (Sykes and Matza 1957: 667), delinquents surrender responsibility to forces beyond their control. By using this technique, delinquents position themselves as victims whose deviant acts are a product of their own violation.

(2) In *denial of injury*, the delinquents deny neither their actions nor their responsibility, but question that there is a resulting harm that needs to be addressed. One person’s vandalism is another one’s art, hooligans beating each other up really is just consenting adults’ choice of how to spend a Sunday afternoon, and occupying an empty house in a place with a housing shortage comes down to the re-appropriation of public space. With this technique, delinquents acknowledge the unlawfulness of their actions, but refuse to understand them as morally reprehensible.

(3) The delinquents can also *deny the victim* in two ways. First, they can question the differentiation between victim and perpetrator. They may argue that the inflicted harm is not an unpremeditated offence, but that it serves as a rightful punishment or retaliation for something the victim did. Second, the offender can also make the victim disappear. This one is easiest and most tempting when the victim is invisible in the first place, that is, in the case of offences that happen without any physical confrontation or identification of or with the victim. This is evident for cases of shoplifting, where delinquents don’t know who has to pay for the damage done and assume that whoever it is doesn’t suffer from the loss, be it because they are insured or because they are too wealthy to be bothered.

(4) In *condemning the condemners*, delinquents shift the attention away from their own actions to those accusing them: Who are they to judge? What right



do they have to question them? Are their actions any more moral? How would they have acted in the same situation? By focussing on the attitudes, arguments and identities of their condemners, delinquents try to change the topic so that the nature of their actions gets lost in debate. More recently, this technique has re-emerged under the term ‘whataboutism’.<sup>52</sup>

(5) *Appealing to higher loyalties* covers a range of strategies. The argumentative figure is that a norm is (temporarily) suspended by the application of more important norms. For instance, most people would agree that stealing in general is wrong, but might be excused under particular circumstances, such as not being able to buy food to take care of one’s children. If a person cannot do justice to two or more conflicting imperatives, they will prioritise which one to violate in order to abide by the other. These dilemmas do exist, but they are also created by the delinquents themselves through their stories.

Delinquents will strive to find ways to neutralise their crimes, thereby lessening the internal conflict between believing in particular rules and norms and violating them – that is, between moral attitudes and immoral actions. We find these and other narrative strategies towards violent action also among former combatants. They are always more than purely self-serving declarations. They are central for the combatants’ self image, as displays of their attempts to control their stories, and vivid examples of how they try to make sense of their experiences. In the following sections, I will detail four techniques of neutralisation used by the interviewees: (1) vilifying others, (2) proving one’s own goodness, (3) undoing one-sided violence, and (4) reframing violent actions.

### **Evil others: Necessary and unnecessary violence**

When asked about violence they had perpetrated themselves, combatants were typically less forthcoming than they were with questions about violence they witnessed or experienced, or questions on non-violent actions.<sup>53</sup> Those who ad-

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<sup>52</sup>Most prominently, whataboutism referred to the Soviet Union’s practice of discrediting any critique by pointing to failures or neglects in Western politics instead of addressing the issue at hand. Whataboutism became a central argumentative figure in the leadership of the 45th president of the United States of America, Donald J. Trump. See also Merriam Webster (2017).

<sup>53</sup>While some combatants might not want to reveal their own participation in violence, the magnitude of forced killing in particular seems to be overestimated. In their large-scale surveys, Annan et al. (2008, 2006) found that about one-fifth of the abducted male and female youth were forced to violate a civilian, and about one-tenth were forced to hurt a family member

mitted to having perpetrated violence were often quick to add that none of this happened voluntarily (thereby denying responsibility), and often talked at length about how they avoided or limited violence whenever possible.<sup>54</sup>

In an environment where the perpetration of violence became largely unavoidable, combatants came to understand that not all violence is the same. In their narratives, they emphasised the differences between what they saw as necessary and unnecessary, good and bad, forced and deliberate violence. One of the techniques former combatants used was to distance themselves from “authentically violent” perpetrators (Hochstetler et al. 2010). For them, morally reprehensible action happened where people enjoyed violence and even exacted punishments where there was no offence:

Based on what I witnessed in captivity, normally orders were given not to commit brutalities. But some people became very enthusiastic and they committed atrocities. [...] If you disobeyed orders to not commit atrocities, you would become very famous and people would see you as someone who defied orders and performed out of his own will. [...] Even when there were no orders barring people from causing suffering to civilians, some people still committed crimes out of insanity. (Joshua, ll. 862–894)

[T]hose things [like mistreating civilians] highly depended on the kind of person [you were]. Personally, I didn’t have such kind of a dark heart. I returned without having hurt anyone. The repercussions of acting inhumane can be so bad, that is why I distanced myself from it. Most of these rude people vanished and perished. I had that feeling that if I acted that way, I would also perish. It wasn’t my will to go into captivity, so there was no reason to act weird and badly. I’d rather be killed for failing to execute a duty that I am forced to do like killing people. (Hope, ll. 741–754)

Even though Hope and Joshua were involved in violations of civilians (in particular, looting), they distanced themselves from those who they saw as being

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or friend. The proportions of abductees forced to kill a civilian, family member or friend are slightly lower; about one-eighth of all combatants said they were forced to kill a soldier in combat. Even though survey data faces the same caveat that it only shows self-reported incidents, the researchers are confident that under-reporting of violence is not a major issue; see Annan et al. (2006: 54).

<sup>54</sup>The perpetration of violence is a textbook case for the difficulty of judging whether research participants are telling the truth, but it also shows the value in moving beyond questions of truth and lie. See Chapter 2 starting on page 15.

“out of sanity” and having “a bad heart”. Their narratives follow a logic of “justification by comparison” (Cromwell and Thurman 2003), in which their own actions weren’t understood as morally reprehensible. They argued that they only perpetrated as much violence as they were asked or forced to, in contrast to others who seemed to have developed a taste for it. This narrative strategy also allowed them to address their participation in violence without accusing themselves. By referring to and comparing themselves to more serious offenders, antiheroes (Copes et al. 2008: 259), and evil others (Presser 2008: 93), they relieved themselves of the weight of their deeds.

While some combatants attributed acts of unnecessary violence to individual mad men (and women), others identified instances of atrocious behaviour with a particular grouping within the LRA: namely, child soldiers (*lutino mony*). Typically, these accounts came from older combatants who had been abducted as adults. They argued that the younger combatants had fewer moral inhibitions about following violent orders: “As adults, there were some things you would try to dodge from doing, unlike children who did everything they were commanded” (John, ll. 1927–1931). As adults, they reasoned, they understood the nature of their actions better, and therefore acted with more restraint. Interestingly, younger combatants used the same argument as a defence; they didn’t know better: “[W]e were abducted and trained to be child soldiers, so as a child you tend to master anything you are told. So we thought those were really good things we did” (Charity, ll. 851–855). Here, Charity also resorts to another narrative strategy: By identifying herself as part of a group of combatants – “we” who became “child soldiers” – she escapes addressing her own actions by disappearing into a more or less defined group.

Evil others are conceptualised both as authentically violent perpetrators, those who are “out of sanity” (Joshua, l. 842) and enjoy, or feel no moral inhibitions about committing atrocities, and as child soldiers who, due to their young age, don’t know better because they haven’t yet internalised moral imperatives not to hurt others. On the other side, violence was often portrayed as necessary where it addressed needs of self-care (in particular, food and sex) and of self-defence. In their narratives, combatants tried to distance themselves both from authentically violent personalities and from individual acts they saw as morally reprehensible. A striking example is that of sexual violence. In their studies of sexual violence among combatants of armed groups in the DRC, Baaz and Stern (2009) found that combatants didn’t think of all sexual violence as being

equally reprehensible. In their accounts, the male combatants did not generally condemn or condone sexual violence against women, but differentiated between somewhat excusable (or at least understandable) ‘lust rapes’ that stemmed from necessity and lacking resources to properly court women, and ‘evil rapes’ that weren’t committed to satisfy sexual ‘needs’, but were aimed at humiliating and hurting the victim (for instance, by penetrating women with inanimate objects such as sticks). While they had no sympathy for those who committed ‘evil rapes’, the satisfaction of legitimate sexual ‘needs’ justified, or excused, taking shortcuts under circumstances that prevented male combatants from getting the women’s consent.

In a similar manner, sexual violence in the LRA was only under certain circumstances coded as such. Men especially did not address forced marriage in and of itself as reprehensible; it had to be qualified to be understood as a violation. For instance, Henry voiced his disapproval of the sexual abuse of young women and girls that he had witnessed:

The other bad thing I saw was mostly scorning women. [...] I saw it with my very own eyes, they captured students and pupils and then they sexually abused them, that was sad for me to see. [...] It so happened that other little children could be abused by very old people and were forced to marry or have sex with them. (Henry, ll. 1151–1169)

Henry emphasised how upset he was about the sexual violence young women and girls were subjected to. Yet he himself was married to two women in captivity – one died during their escape, and the other left him upon their return. Henry is evasive about the terms of their separation, yet points out that he didn’t take his wives forcefully, but lived with them based on mutual agreement. In any case, he clearly differentiates between the relationships he had with these women and the sexual abuse of young women and girls that he had witnessed. One of the criteria for his disapproval seems to be the young age of the female combatants, and the big age difference between “little children” and “very old people”. When asked whether he himself had a wife in the bush, Henry answered defensively: “I got a wife there, so she could help me by cooking” (Henry, ll. 762–763). Having a wife was seen as normal, even necessary, to go about one’s everyday activities. Clearly, Henry’s relationship with his given wives didn’t seem to fall

into the same category of morally reprehensible sexual violence.<sup>55</sup> In the same way, women often rejected their relationships not just because they were forced, but because they violated other norms, such as their own young age or the age difference between the spouses:

I was four years into babysitting after which I was given to a man and gave birth to a child. It wasn't easy. I was abducted when I was very young and I didn't know most of the things. And when they told me to be a wife to that man, I was heartbroken because I was young and the man was old. (Faith, ll. 392–399)

Besides such 'inappropriate' relationships within the group, combatants also harshly criticised sexual violence and rape that was perpetrated by other armed groups (most notably, the NRA/M) against male and female combatants of the LRA.

Similarly, violence against civilians was seen as legitimate and at times necessary where it addressed basic physical needs of the combatants. In these instances, it could even be perpetrated against explicit orders from the leadership, as Charity explained: "So those rules [not to loot from civilians] are also hard to follow. For instance if you are told not to enter the huts of civilians and not to steal anything from them, and at that time you are very hungry (*laughs*) (...)" (Charity, ll. 766–771). Acts of theft weren't seen as major offences, both in comparison to other, unnecessary acts of violence and because they resulted from necessity: "[O]nce they gave me a group of people to lead I gave orders that forbid the killing of civilians. But we continued to loot food because we needed food to survive" (Isaac, ll. 172–176). Here, Isaac excuses these acts of theft by emphasising how he forbade unnecessary violence (the killing of civilians). Moreover, both interviewees appealed to higher loyalties (namely, their own hunger and survival) to justify the dispossession of civilians. Apart from these reasons of self-care, violence was in some instances understood as necessary to defend oneself against enemy forces and armed civilians. George, for instance, recounted how he and a colleague accidentally met a government soldier while looking for usable goods on the battlefield: "We cut that guy into pieces because he was a potential threat to us" (George, ll. 732–734). In his account, this lethal act of violence was warranted because the enemy soldier could have become a threat to their lives as well.

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<sup>55</sup>This understanding is facilitated by the institution of forced marriage, as I will argue below.

These narrative efforts to position oneself as morally decent – for one reason or another – also offer a key to understanding how individuals with different levels of commitment can come together and act unified. The relationship between engaged and hesitant perpetrators not only encourages the former, but also helps the latter to become involved with less moral hazard. The existence of enthusiastic combatants made it easier for others to identify themselves as morally decent, as different from “authentically violent” (Hochstetler et al. 2010) perpetrators. As such, the dynamic between the ‘violent few’ (Collins 2009: 370–412) and those who just ‘tag along’ is crucial for the group’s propensity towards and its use of violence. It allowed individual combatants to find their place in the LRA, and to negotiate their engagement through positioning themselves, thereby upholding claims to moral decency.

### **Proving one’s essential goodness**

Combatants were not only trying to distance themselves from authentically violent comrades; they were also using their narratives to confirm their own decency and moral integrity. This could happen in passing, while explaining or justifying singular actions, or it could become a powerful storyline driving the whole narrative. John opened his narrative with the following statement:

[W]hen I was first abducted and taken into captivity I was a mature man already and old enough. [...] What prevented me from returning home was the fear of being captured in the process of returning. I didn’t want to have a wife because I did mind only about myself and how I could get out of captivity. I always felt if there came an opportunity, I would escape. One other important thing I was doing was to help other rebels and abductees. It is the reason my wife finally lived with me. If I tell you the story, then you will understand better. I was so merciful and pardoned people. I was given a leadership position even though they barred me from reaching Uganda, thinking I would escape and return home. Despite that I was digging seriously [cultivating crops] to sustain me. (John, ll. 80–102)

Throughout the interview (which lasted for more than two and a half hours, and was continued on another occasion), John emphasised how he remained a decent person in captivity and upon his return – resisting his immersion in the LRA, protecting his colleagues and the woman who would become his wife, speaking up

to the leadership about injustices, being honest and forgiving even in the face of personal violations. It is “the story” he wants us to “understand better”; it is the story through which he asserts his personhood and asks us to do the same. Upon his return, he became engaged as the chairperson for a group of returnees, trying to help them to readjust to civilian life. These claims to decency were at odds, or least seemed to be for him, with the fact that he held a leadership position, being promoted to the ranks of second lieutenant, lieutenant, and eventually captain. When we asked him how he came to receive a high rank, he explained: “I kept people well and I didn’t have any bad report. People didn’t escape from my camp and I didn’t torture or mistreat people. I didn’t order for the beating of people. It didn’t happen. Not even once” (John, ll. 1219–1224). The implicit assumption that John struggles with is that leadership positions are given to the most ruthless fighters – a group he doesn’t want to be counted in. Against this perception, he tries to emphasise the good he could do from his position of power and recognition. For instance, he recounts how he made a personal call to Kony to save his future wife from being killed on the suspicion of attempting to escape:

When I heard about it I reported [via radio call] to Kony that I had heard over the radio that this lady was to be killed although she hadn’t done anything wrong. I stood atop a hill to ensure the radio transmission was clear. I told him that this lady was a polite person and that some other people only wanted to escape with her properties [...]. I convinced him that this lady wasn’t going to escape back home. If she did, I would take full responsibility. [...] He said that I worked hard for the rebels. So killing that lady would hurt me, and subsequently I would also escape. [...] He ordered Otti Vincent to leave that lady and that she shouldn’t be taken away. [...] They were called back and she was finally released. (John, ll. 186–230)

In this account, John emphasises his initiative and the trust and respect he gained from his superiors, and argues how he used them to rescue the woman who eventually became his wife. He made a bold and, as he later adds, somewhat risky move to save her from being killed. In his narrative, the power and agency he has are never opportunistic; they are instead assets to protect those around him, and to enforce his ideas of just action.

Others made claims to decency by referring to their identity as civilians, or their ‘civilian mindset’. Joshua contemplated his time in the bush:

I sometimes think God didn't mean to have me in captivity because I was so grounded in being more of a civilian than a combatant while there. A soldier must inflict pain all the time on someone who doesn't listen to people's advices [obey orders] as well. That qualifies someone to be a soldier. I was so much absorbed by the civilian kind of life. I felt that torturing people hurt their feelings and it hurt mine too. (*lowered his voice*) (Joshua, ll. 632–643)

During his time in the bush, Joshua was mandated to take care of the wives of a high-ranking commander, and rose to the ranks of sergeant himself. In his narrative, Joshua refuses to understand himself as a combatant, positioning himself as “being more of a civilian” than a soldier even while being part of the LRA. To him, being a good soldier required being indifferent towards other people's suffering; one had to lead and command without showing compassion. Against this backdrop, he doesn't, or more importantly *doesn't want to*, ‘pass’ as a soldier. His narrative is a rare instance of someone who openly shares his negative feelings. It shows how much it means to him to be acknowledged as a good person. This effort also guides his life upon return:

I want to try as much as possible to be an example to those who returned from captivity in living a transformed and dignified life. I want to be a good example and not a bad one. Apparently, some of the people who returned from captivity are in prison because they started to do bad things.<sup>56</sup> Some are being abused and stigmatised for committing heinous atrocities. I want people to think that if all returnees were like me, everything would be good. I want to do my personal things. I don't want to disgrace my name in the community. I don't want to use any abusive language against anyone. [...] I do not to want to acquire things from my friends. I don't like free things. I want to work hard on that. (Joshua, ll. 1680–1707)

Joshua emphasises that he wants to lead an exemplary life, being the best version of himself, but also of a person who returned from captivity. He is committed to convincing his community that the bad experiences they may have had with other returnees don't apply to him; that he is as good and hard-working a person as anyone else. His narrative shows how he holds on to a ‘desirable identity’ (Oloya 2013: 77) while still struggling with the shadow of his violent

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<sup>56</sup>Most likely, Joshua is referring to the case of Onen Kamdulu, who together with six others resorted to armed robbery upon his return. He was charged with aggravated robbery and spent nine years in Luzira Maximum Security Prison in Kampala.



past.<sup>57</sup>

Still others were more determined to refuse the label ‘combatant’ altogether, on both personal and general grounds:

We saw that the government didn’t protect us when we were abducted and taken to the bush. When we returned they gave us amnesty instead. But in the amnesty bill, Act II spells out clearly that amnesty is offered to a combatant. But we were abducted when we were young, because the government didn’t protect us. And when we returned home we should be given amnesty? We received it for reasons of formality. I even told them, when I went to get the amnesty card, that possibly the card would help me in the future as evidence, because I know the government didn’t protect us. Can a ten years old child be a combatant or soldier? Can they make such a profound decision in life? I just took the amnesty card for reasons of formality and went back home. (Faith, ll. 897–917)

You know, me, I was abducted and it was not in my interest. I was abducted, and most of the things the rebels were doing are bad things and I don’t like it. You cannot influence what you are supposed to do because you have to do what they need. [...] I was very sad when I was forced to kill someone, because I am not a killer. But I was forced and they could have killed me if I had refused. (Isaac, ll. 166–179)

For Faith, this refusal was not just about her, but about everyone who was abducted at a young age. She questions the applicability of the label ‘combatant’ on formal grounds: for her, young combatants simply lack the capacity to make informed decisions about something as profound as being a soldier. By invoking her young age, she attempts to recover a childhood that has been forcefully taken away from her. She rejects being ‘forgiven’ by the government that she sees as responsible for her situation, as it failed to protect her from being abducted in the first place. Isaac, by comparison, refuses to see himself as a combatant, or more precisely, as somebody who kills people; because that is not how he sees himself: “I am not a killer”. Since he didn’t choose to become part of the LRA, and was forced to commit violence against his will, he sees himself not as a combatant, but as a captive. His refusal is also visible in the use of the term ‘rebel’ (*adwii*) and ‘they’; clearly, he doesn’t understand himself as one of them, but emphasises

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<sup>57</sup>I will talk about these narrative efforts to hold on to a desirable, pre-abduction identity in the face of adverse action in Chapter 4.7 starting on page 178.

his forced situation as an abductee.

These accounts have a common narrative goal, namely, to show how combatants resisted their brutalisation and remained decent human beings, in both acting and understanding their and the LRA's actions. In doing so, they make claims to a stable moral self throughout the experiences they had in captivity.<sup>58</sup> These narratives aim to show how their authors actively resisted moral decay, trying to stay moral in an immoral place. These narrative claims to moral decency can also be read as an appropriation of the past. Telling their stories also allows former combatants to make up for past failures to do justice to the identity of one's imagination. In this sense, the narrative becomes a site for reconciling one's past and present self.

### **Reciprocity and retaliation: Undoing one-sided violence**

Combatants witnessed and partook in different kinds of violence: within the group (against their colleagues), against other armed actors (like the UPDF), and against civilians in the affected areas. Among the three, violence against civilians was perhaps the most ethically challenging, as it affected people who were not members of the warring parties and, as a consequence, were typically unarmed. That is, civilians lacked both the means and the intention to defend themselves with potentially lethal violence. This lack of reciprocity makes violence against civilians particularly hard to justify (Härtel and Schwalb 2016: 1–2). At the same time, combatants were civilians themselves before they were forcefully drawn into the conflict. They know first-hand about the challenges civilians face in confronting armed groups, and often feel closely connected to them through the similarity of their experiences or their shared ethnic identity. How do combatants deal with the apparent moral dilemma of having to hurt unarmed members of their own social group?

When former combatants were asked about the rationale behind atrocities against civilians, we received five kinds of answers:

(1) They said that they weren't aware that this was happening or thought of it as a misunderstanding or intentional misinformation (that is, they assumed that

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<sup>58</sup>Lois Presser (2008) has coined the term "stability narratives" for narratives that make claims to an unchanged moral self through episodes of delinquency. I will elaborate on this and other 'grand narratives' on the place that war and violence occupy in combatants' life stories in Chapter 4.7 starting on page 178.

the real culprits were with the government forces or other armed actors).

(2) They saw this as a result of individual misbehaviour that was either encouraged or tolerated by the leadership, and sometimes even slipped its attention. Some combatants even emphasised that the leadership and Kony himself were strongly against it, and would order severe punishments when such instances became known.

(3) They thought of civilian casualties as an unfortunate but largely unavoidable by-product of waging war, sometimes referring to an African proverb: “When the elephants are fighting, the grass and the trees are the ones to suffer” (Joel, ll. 493–496). One interviewee even argued that sexual violence, for instance, happened because there are other priorities in wartime than enforcing the high level of discipline necessary to prevent these violations.

(4) Violence against civilians was understood as an indirect communication strategy vis-à-vis the combatants and the government forces. As such, it was meant to remind the combatants of the risks associated with escape: “This [the mutilation of civilians] also frightened the rebels who wanted to escape and join the UPDF. Through this they got reminded that if they escape, they will be killed” (John, ll. 898–901). For the government and the civilian population, attacks and massacres were meant to prove that the LRA was still strong and capable:

They will send maybe only ten rebels to cause a terrible havoc. They would do a very memorable attack so that the BBC would get to know about it. It will be done intentionally through Kony’s orders. They would shoot cars and people and then return [to the bush]. They would burn properties, including houses, so that people know Kony is still active. It would be a reminder. They would commit atrocities to remind people. (John, ll. 2323–2334)

(5) But the most common response was to reject the premise of one-sided violence. Many interviewees argued that civilians brought violence upon themselves in one way or another, thereby neutralising their violent acts by denying that civilians are, in fact, innocent and vulnerable victims. According to the interviewees, violence against civilians was at least partly caused by the civilians’ behaviour because they (a) cooperated with the government forces, (b) harmed the LRA in another way, (c) presented a threat that warranted preemptive violence, (d) were uncooperative, or (e) behaved disrespectfully. Moreover, combatants tried to neutralise their actions by (f) emphasising their own victimisation and (g) abdicating responsibility for them.

*Cooperation with government forces.* Interviewees justified violence against civilians as a form of punishment or disciplinary measure for cooperating with the government forces. They reported how civilians took sides in the conflict, for instance, by informing the UPDF or other armed forces about the approach or the whereabouts of the LRA:

Whenever the LRA passed close to the villages, the civilians would run and report to the SPLA. The SPLA would in the same manner move with the person who reported the LRA to their locations so that they were attacked. That was the reason there was a fight between them [the LRA and the civilian population]. It was the same way of launching attacks against each other [as in Uganda]. (Jackson, ll. 663–673)

Not only did the combatants feel betrayed by these actions, but it changed the civilians' status in their eyes. As they argued, by sharing this information with the enemy forces, the civilians gave up their neutrality and became involved in the war. Civilians were not solely considered as victims of the LRA's violence anymore, but as warring parties "launching attacks against each other". Therefore, civilians couldn't count on the good will of the LRA anymore.<sup>59</sup>

*Causing harm by making noise and attracting attention.* The former combatants took issue not only with what they saw as collaboration with the enemy. As the interviewees argued, civilians also brought harm upon themselves unintentionally by attracting attention when the LRA approached. Instances of symbolic violence in particular were framed as necessary or legitimate responses to civilians who behaved erratically:

I would like to say that these things [mutilations of civilians] happened right around the time when I was abducted. An incident happened near our home in F [a place in Gulu district] before I was abducted. It is the civilians who provoke the rebels to cut their lips. Such temper arises when civilians provoke rebels. For instance, if the rebels are bypassing your home on a nearby road, and they have not even come to your home to cause any atrocities, and you start to ululate "wulululu!" This sound alerts the government forces and indicates the location of the rebels to them. So then the rebels cut your lips off. (John, ll. 873–887)

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<sup>59</sup>This dynamic has also been described by Olsen (2007).

With this statement, John pursues a number of narrative goals. First, he provides an explanation for why he did not resist his abduction though he was “a mature man already and old enough” (John, ll. 81–82), as he said in his opening statement. Since mutilations “started right around the time I was abducted”, it wouldn’t have been wise to do so. But second, and more important, he gives a rationale for committing such atrocious acts: Mutilations were both a punishment to deter civilians from attracting attention in the future, and a means to ‘shut them up’, with no hesitation about causing permanent harm. For John, what causes the offence is the perceived provocation on the side of the civilians, who “provoke the rebels to cut their lips” by making unwarranted noise, even though “they have not even come to your home to cause any atrocities”. Here, the civilians’ efforts to protect themselves from anticipated harm turn from a defensive into an offensive move. The interviewees didn’t question the proportionality of such measures. For them, it was a life-and-death situation as well. Even if civilians didn’t mean to betray the LRA, their erratic behaviour put combatants at severe risk of being detected and attacked by the government forces. Therefore, their punishment or violent silencing was seen as justified.

*Preemptive violence.* Many interviewees who spent some time in Sudan emphasised the propensity towards violence among civilians. The Lutugu especially were perceived as a belligerent and routinely armed tribe: “These Lutugu communities were like soldiers, most of the people have guns” (Flavia, ll. 1158–1160). Because combatants found that civilians in Sudan very likely possessed guns themselves, they became “like soldiers”. In this situation, the combatants presented arming themselves and opening fire as a necessary measure to keep the upper hand in the confrontation with supposedly equally well armed and hostile civilians who wouldn’t hesitate to fire the first bullet if given the chance.

*Uncooperative behaviour.* In other instances, combatants argued that they had to resort to violent measures because civilians wouldn’t respond to their requests otherwise. In their view, civilians provoked a violent response by refusing to give food and other resources to the combatants when they asked nicely for it: “Sometimes the [LRA’s] orders weren’t rude. [...] If a civilian gives what is asked from them, they are forgiven. But if they don’t, their possessions are forcefully looted” (Hope, ll. 708–714). In this argument, the blame for acts of violent theft is shifted from the combatants who loot to the civilians who are robbed of their possessions: If they had agreed to share their provisions, there would have been no need to steal from them and to apply force; “they [would be] forgiven”. Under

the conditions of scarcity, the civilians' resistance to these orders 'forced' the combatants to take things violently. Likewise, the failure to obey other orders issued by the LRA, such as to avoid movement or to stay in certain places, also warranted their violation:

If I have gone to spy where my people live, I can easily tell them that the rebels might pass here today, so it will be upon them to evacuate the place, because I have already told them. So if you keep staying and they come and get you, it will be upon you not me, because I have already told you what to do and given you the information. (Moses, ll. 469–481)

Here, the orders given by the LRA are understood as an attempt to protect civilians, who are in turn seen as being responsible for their violation where they 'choose' to ignore these instructions: "it will be upon you not me, because I have already told you what to do".

*Retaliation for disrespectful behaviour.* Some interviewees also argued that violence was a warranted retaliation for disrespectful behaviour on the part of the civilians. By conducting attacks and massacres, they simply reacted to claims that the LRA was vanishing, an insult that could not go unanswered. It was not perceived only as a humiliation. Since the LRA lives to a large degree on its reputation to wreak havoc wherever they go, such a statement of weakness could have become a self-fulfilling prophecy, thereby threatening the LRA's existence. This is why, as John argued, people were attacked even in the camps, where they had little contact with LRA forces:

Even in the camps like Lukodi you hear them talk that people were massacred. The rebels were provoked by the words people said. Like for example they said the rebels were no longer strong and vanishing for good. The government troops had started jublations thinking that the war was over. Immediately Kony ordered for child soldiers who could not escape back home easily and were of use to the rebellion. [...] They came here and did a lot of atrocities. People wondered how the rebels resurfaced [...]. It was all because of that. (John, ll. 2338–2357)

Form John's account, it seems unclear or irrelevant who spread this misinformation, i.e., whether it was the government or civilians who were to blame in the first place. By adjusting their behaviour to this information – becoming more

relaxed about attacks, dropping some of the precautionary measures in place, returning to normal life – civilians provoked a violent response by the LRA.<sup>60</sup>

Next to these efforts to undo one-sided violence, to make their offences ‘go away’, combatants resorted to a number of other techniques to neutralise their and the LRA’s violations:

*Emphasising one’s own victimisation.* Some combatants questioned the status ‘non-combatant’ altogether, both by drawing civilians into the realm of war and by taking themselves out of it. They did so by emphasising their own status as (former) civilians and abductees. Janet, for instance, explicitly compared her and her colleagues’ situation to that of the civilians:

We [abductees] do share ideas and we feel we are equal to other people in the community who didn’t go through what we went through. While we were in captivity, those who were at home also had serious problems and challenges. They were in camps. In the camps, life wasn’t easy so I feel there wasn’t any difference to people who were in captivity. Life was equally hard for everyone whether they were in captivity or not. (Janet, ll. 1417–1428)

By comparing her fate of abduction with the civilians’ displacement, Janet gets around talking about the fact that the civilians’ suffering is caused by the LRA’s actions. Comparing her suffering to that of the civilians allows her to speak about the latter’s suffering within addressing her role in it. By emphasising her own victimisation, her status as a perpetrator of violence becomes invisible.

*Abdicating responsibility.* Many combatants did not deny that atrocities by LRA forces happened, but instead of blaming the LRA for its atrocious acts, they emphasised the government’s shortcomings in preventing them. This strategy shares characteristics of two neutralisation techniques: denying responsibility, and accusing the accusers. Interviewees argued that the government failed to protect them from being abducted by the LRA, and was therefore to be held accountable for the damage done. This argument was often brought up in the context of the trial of Dominic Ongwen:

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<sup>60</sup>However, those who commit the worst violence are identified as child soldiers. Here, John also distances himself from perpetrating this kind of violence by attributing it to a different group of combatants.

Dominic was just sent to do these heinous acts while in captivity. It's hard to know for sure that he committed those acts. Like any other person, he was just captured. It was the role [of the Ugandan government] to protect his life, but instead he was left to suffer in captivity. The government neglected his life, so he was exposed to do those cruel things. Dominic also did these things to protect himself. (Hope, ll. 1599–1609)

In her response, Hope defends not only Dominic Ongwen, but first and foremost herself: “like any other person, he was just captured”. Since he didn’t choose to become a combatant, she argues, he cannot be held accountable for the acts he committed in captivity. Not only did the government fail to protect him and everyone else from being abducted – a point that was emphasised by many former combatants – but their inconsistent and half-hearted fight against the LRA exacerbated the suffering of the civilian population:

The government is inciting citizens and rebels alike. Yet this war is not the mandate of some of the rebels in captivity. The government even goes ahead to share information on all media platforms that the rebels are already powerless and the civilians start to become relaxed about the war. Thereafter you hear that 40 people have been abducted from a certain place. The rebels do this to avenge. The government should be made responsible for that. If the government was telling people to be aware that the rebels are still strong, and that people should limit their movement, people wouldn’t have been abducted in large numbers like it happened. (John, ll. 2363–2379)

In this statement, it is – at least primarily – not the combatants’ actions that violated the civilians, but the government’s instigation of revenge by the LRA, and its insufficient measures to protect them from being targeted. While it somehow acknowledges that civilians are caught between a rock and a hard place, the consequence is not to spare them from war violence. Rather, John emphasises the government’s role in bringing the conflict about, and its failure to prevent a violent backlash against innocent civilians. The problem is not that this is not a correct diagnosis of the government’s poor handling of the conflict. What is problematic about it is that it deflects blame and thereby responsibility from the combatants who commit the crimes to the national authority who should protect its citizens from them. And there is truth to that. But, as a narrative strategy, it legitimises the use of violence against civilians, because it excuses the combatants from their deeds.



### **Reframing action: Soldiers and spouses, punishments and work**

Throughout this thesis, I have mostly referred to my interviewees as (former) combatants, or tried to use other neutral terms to describe their engagement with the LRA. In particular, I have tried to avoid the use of the term rebel. What is problematic about referring to non-state armed actors as rebels and state-sponsored armed actors as soldiers is the implicit connotation on the legitimacy of their use of violence. While soldiers are thought of as legal and thereby legitimate representatives of the state, with a clear mandate to fight armed opposition, rebels not only question the government's claim to power, but stand outside the law. Not only are they illegal, but they are often simultaneously described as having no legitimate cause to fight. Most importantly, former combatants themselves refused to be addressed as rebels because they saw it as a negation of their personhood: "We are being labelled as rebels but we are not rebels. We are the same as people at home" (Herbert, ll. 735–737).<sup>61</sup> These connotations also have an influence on how combatants see themselves and how they and others evaluate their own actions. The attribution of role identities that are culturally coded as legitimate helps to reframe actions that belong to these role identities as good, normal, or necessary. A soldier killing an enemy in combat is not understood as somebody committing a capital crime, but as a person fulfilling a duty that comes with the job title: "it is what soldiers do", as Kony was recalled to have said on numerous occasions (Cakaj 2016: 7). Being able to resort to these role identities and frames offers combatants access to established narratives or 'formula stories', as Brookman et al. (2011) call them. By selectively resorting to role identities, combatants can shift between subcultural and more conventional narratives (Sandberg 2010), adhering to their specific morals one at a time.

Having a vocabulary that defines actions and obligations helps in finding answers to the question Goffman (1986: 25) so famously posed: "What is it that's going on here?" Reframing roles and actions as legitimate is another technique to distance oneself from a violent self-image, and to neutralise the violence one experiences, witnesses and perpetrates. In the following, I would like to show how the adaptation of frames and role identities has the potential to change perceptions about the legitimacy of violent actions. Here, I will focus on two aspects: (1) the

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<sup>61</sup>In the Acholi original, Herbert says "Waco ni wan adwii ento wan bene pe adwii. Wan wa dano adana calo dano ma gangi" (Herbert, ll. 731–732). Oloya (2013: 16–18) has suggested to translate 'dano adana' as 'human being' or 'human person'. Following Oloya, the second sentence could be more accurately translated as "We are human beings [just] like people at home", a translation that supports my argument.

adaptation of role identities as soldiers and as spouses, and (2) the framing of violent actions within the group as punishments and against civilians as work.

As I have argued above, it matters whether combatants are addressed as soldiers or as rebels; not least because it matters to them.<sup>62</sup> The interviewees mostly addressed themselves as soldiers and not as rebels. If they used the word ‘rebel’ at all, they used it to refer to their experiences before and upon abduction, where rebels signified the unknown, those who came at night.<sup>63</sup> Once part of the LRA, they typically referred to themselves and their colleagues as soldiers (*mony*) as opposed to the government soldiers (*mony pa gamente*) who were sometimes also called *adwii*, enemy or terrorist, the same term which is used to mean rebels.<sup>64</sup>

Their use of language illustrates how combatants try to think of themselves as legitimate (as opposed to illegitimate) participants in war. This revaluation is a common motif of subcultural narratives. In their study of the street economy, Copes et al. (2008) show how its protagonists want to be understood as *hustlers*, an identity that is constructed in opposition to that of *crackheads*. While both are clearly outlaws, they strive to be acknowledged as legitimate, even noble outlaws. In a similar manner, combatants describe themselves not as rebels, but as soldiers (or by referring to the military position they held as intelligence, escorts, guards, or rescue). I would argue that this has something to do with the common readings of the two terms: while rebels are understood as being in the business of waging a destructive and self-serving war, soldiering is imagined as an honest profession of brave men and women. It is, in short, a role ascription combatants more willingly identify with. Its usage importantly changes how combatants understand the actions they perform. In particular, violence perpetrated as a soldier, or in fulfilment of a military duty, becomes invisible. That becomes clear from their statements on their own violence. As Fred and Nathan put it: “I never killed anyone. Except in battle while exchanging gun fire with the soldiers” (Fred, ll.

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<sup>62</sup>To be sure, language usage is somewhat arbitrary, especially when working with translated narratives. For instance, combatants only rarely used the term rebel (*adwii*) to refer to LRA combatants, but for reasons of clarity, the interpreters often choose to translate *gin* (they), *olum* ([those who live in the] bush), (*mony pa*) *Lakwena* (Lakwena’s soldiers), *lumony* (persons of war, or soldiers), and *lulweny* (those who fight) as rebels. To address problems of translation and cultural and language conventions, I focused on connotations and connections made by the interviewees in addition to the exact phrasing.

<sup>63</sup>Beyond practical reasons for abduction at nighttime, the night has a special meaning in Acholi culture. It is the time when all bad things, including illnesses, death, and sorcery, happen (Oloya 2013: 79).

<sup>64</sup>A similar observation has been made by Oloya (2013: 95).

340–342) and “I was already indoctrinated into becoming a fighter, but I did not want to kill anyone. I would only intend to kill when it was a battle” (Nathan, ll. 405–408). What both mean by that is that killing on the battlefield doesn’t really count, because it belongs to the realm of warfare, of acting as a soldier in war. At the very least, violence on the battlefield becomes a moral afterthought; it is not the kind of violence the interviewees struggle to explain.

By making the perpetration of violence part of a role identity (namely, as soldiers on the battlefield), people not only frame violence as part of their job, but they compartmentalise. That is, they differentiate between the morals of their private and their professional identities. Robert J. Lifton (1986) has argued that this compartmentalisation allowed Nazi doctors to do their jobs, i.e. to perform cruel and absurd medical experiments on Jews and other targeted social groups while being loving and caring parents and spouses at home. This points to a certain identification with the combatant label, in contrast to the refusal of a combatant identity that is visible from the narratives of Joshua and Faith. However, these strategies are not mutually exclusive, but may overlap in individuals’ narratives.

Role identities are not only taken up, but also assigned to others. Quite importantly, this happens within the institution of forced marriage, through which the combatants became husbands and wives to each other. Spouses start to live “like husband and wife” (*callo lacoo ki dako*). They were confronted with expectations of family life, mutual care and, for the women, obedience. While they resisted these norms and expectations on numerous occasions, they had to justify their resistance and were, or became, aware of its consequences. The organisation facilitates this understanding by making it an institution: namely, forced marriage. Forced marriage allowed male combatants in particular to speak and think about their affiliations not as sexual violence, but as legitimate unions between consenting adults. While experiences of sexual abuse in their forced marriages feature prominently in the accounts of female interviewees, male combatants only rarely addressed it, but rather talked about ‘inappropriate’ relationship or sexual violence perpetrated by other armed groups. Sexual violence that happened in forced marriages hardly appears in their narratives. Not only does it not become part of their stories, but it is also genuinely not perceived as such. As an institution, forced marriage renders sexual violence invisible, except for those who experience it.

Another example of such processes in which violence is reframed is how combatants talked about violence within the group. Most interviewees only hesitantly answered when they were asked about violence they and others experienced and participated in, but they spoke with more ease about what they understood as punishments. Here, combatants buy into the logic of the LRA: that the violence they and others experienced was justified for transgressing the organisation's rules. In their accounts, they argued how they or their colleagues 'had it coming' by transgressing the rules, or transgressing stupidly. For instance, Joyce recounted how a friend attempted to escape and was beaten to the point of unconsciousness. Though she felt sorry for her, Joyce was harsh in her verdict: "I pleaded her to forgive those who tortured her, because they didn't choose to do so and I even told her that it was her fault to plan an escape during daytime. It should have been at night!" (Joyce, ll. 680–684). By addressing violence within the group as punishments, combatants gave in to the notion that these acts were legitimate, and that they could have avoided being subjected to them by following the rules strictly. In this sense, it allowed them to regain a sense of control, however deceptive.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, by understanding the beatings of colleagues as punishments, they relieved themselves of the moral weight of having to hurt others.

There are other examples where the use of particular terms points to an underlying mindset. For instance, combatants often stated that they were 'going for operation' or 'to work' (*wacito ka tic* – we went to work) when sent to attack, abduct or loot from civilians. By using these terms, looting and abducting new combatants became part of their jobs as soldiers. In a similar vein, delinquent actions were framed in a way that they didn't seem as morally reprehensible. For instance, combatants often said that they took or picked (*kwanyo*) things from civilians instead of saying they looted or stole (*kwalo*) them. By choosing their words carefully, combatants tried to avoid the moral repercussions of admitting to actions that were, even without further qualification, commonly understood as wrong. As a consequence, deviant acts became somewhat invisible.

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<sup>65</sup>Though some interviewees emphasised that almost all actions could be punished, and that there was no way to reliably avoid punishment through obedience. Violence could always be used to set an example irrespective of any transgressions, and high-ranking commanders in particular were authorised to treat the members of their household as they pleased.

**Linking identity and action: Role identities and committed action**

Frames and role identities are not just means to neutralise violent action. To understand oneself as a soldier and the war of the LRA as a legitimate struggle over power is also part of identifying with the organisation and becoming a committed fighter. That is, as combatants tried to distance themselves from violence and violent identities, they became further entrenched in the organisation and its ideology. People became the roles they played. How did that happen?

Here, I would like to look at the psychosocial dynamics at play, in particular, the concept of cognitive dissonance as developed by Leon Festinger. Festinger et al. (2011) looked at how eschatological cults deal with and survive the frustration of their prophecies. What happens after the announced date of apocalypse passes uneventfully? How do their followers manage to keep believing in the face of counter-factual evidence? Why do these cults not only survive these disappointed expectations, but become stronger through them? Festinger (2001) argues that the key to understand these dynamics is the desire to disentangle cognitive dissonance. By cognitive dissonance, he refers to a state of mind in which individuals experience a mismatch or incompatibility between the world as perceived and the world as believed, or between what they say or do and how they feel about it. This mismatch, or cognitive dissonance, between actions and attitudes (and, by prolongation, identity) is also very much present in the narratives of former combatants. Their struggle to prove their essential goodness, and to distance themselves from authentically violent comrades, is part of their efforts to resolve this internal conflict. Basically, people can resort to three distinct strategies to reduce cognitive dissonance: they can (1) change their behaviour in a way that it becomes more compatible with their attitudes and identity claims, (2) change their cognition – for instance, about the moral reprehensibility of their actions, or the relevance of these actions to their identity claims, or (3) keep themselves from exposure to information that confirms or increases their cognitive dissonance (Festinger 2001: 1–31). Since combatants had only limited leeway to change their behaviour and to ignore or access new information, I will discuss how combatants came to change their cognition, that is, their attitudes towards violent action.

First, actions create new and genuine commitments that aren't necessarily identical with the individual's prior attitudes. These obligating effects of actions might be particularly dire considering the severity of initiation (Aronson and

Mills 1959).<sup>66</sup> While reports of combatants being regularly forced to harm and even kill their family members seem to be overblown in magnitude,<sup>67</sup> initiation procedures were often traumatising and gave combatants the impression that they could not return home. At the same time, they may see their survival as an achievement and an obligation to persevere. The resulting role identities typically do not replace but supplement their prior identities. Combatants hold on to their desired identities (as civilians, daughters and sons, devout Christians, etc.) while adapting to stigmatised identities that allow them to become functional members of the LRA (Oloya 2013: 77). At the same time, role identities help combatants to figure out what to do – not in a moral but in a practical sense. Role identities serve as guides to action, both in the sense of *scripts* (what should I do?) and as *enforcements* (what are my options?).

The narratives of former combatants support the idea that, once they had accepted their roles as soldiers, they tried to live up to the expectations and hopes that commanders articulated, and that their obedience was not purely a result of fear of punishment. When asked how she felt about punishing others, Charity replied: “If you are taught how to be a soldier, you can never feel bad, no matter what happens to anyone (*laughs*) (...)” (Charity, ll. 736–738). Such self-identifications were encouraged by the organisation and may have fostered some kind of professional ethics. Combatants became ‘committed insiders’ (Hundeide 2003) as they started to learn and master the rules and tasks assigned to them. As they became committed to their roles within the organisation and started to identify with these roles, their definitions of justifiable action changed. Violence became coded as good or necessary where it was understood to serve a higher

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<sup>66</sup>That initiation procedures – that is, whether membership is easy or hard to realise – impact people’s assessment of a group has been experimentally studied by Aronson and Mills (1959). In their study, the researchers assigned research participants randomly to one of three groups, and asked them to perform tests of varying difficulty to be admitted to the group. The research participants viewed the group more positively if they had to perform a more difficult initiation test. This phenomenon can be explained through the theory of cognitive dissonance: People who had to make an effort to become members cannot give a negative assessment of the group without admitting that their efforts were a waste of time and energy. To upgrade their perception of the group is a means to rationalise their investment into it. These observations have been confirmed by a replication study by Gerard and Mathewson (1966).

<sup>67</sup>None of my respondents reported this, even though these narratives are clearly incentivised by the advocacy sector. This is not to claim that these things didn’t happen or affect the way combatants and civilians acted. Unfortunately, there aren’t any good statistics on violence against family members upon abduction. In the SWAY sample, 18 percent of male and 5 percent of female abductees said they had been forced to kill a family member or a friend, but the survey does not differentiate between violence upon abduction and violence during their time in captivity (Annan et al. 2008: 28).

purpose. George's account gives an instructive example of this dynamic:

Interviewer (I): How did you make sure that those people who were under your command followed the orders you gave them?

George (G): What I showed them was exactly what they [the LRA] did; so I showed them that anyone who tries to escape must be killed. So that was the thing I used to do while I was commanding the forces. For example, there were three people who tried to escape and they were brought to me. I made them stand before the congregation and they were cut into pieces. Nobody escaped after that. [...]

I: Well it seems as if to make an example to the others as a warning not to escape was more important than protecting their lives?

G: It is more important than protecting their lives, because if they all escape you will not be able to get new guards or soldiers. If we do not kill those people who try to escape then we will end up with no fighters, so it was necessary to kill. (George, ll. 244–257, 277–288)

By framing the killing of new recruits as a necessary measure to prevent others from escaping, George legitimised the use of lethal violence: a more lenient reaction to these escape attempts could have hurt the organisation in the long term. As the LRA's survival is understood to be more important than that of a few individuals, it was justified in setting an example by killing them to protect a higher good. This statement shows how techniques of neutralisation (here, the appeal to higher authorities) and processes of identification are intertwined. By buying into the organisation's logic, George was capable of absolving himself from the moral repercussions of his decision: *it was necessary*. George described how he eventually became a committed fighter: "because if I were not committed I would be the one to die" (George, ll. 620–622). But, as he admits, his commitment was not only about survival: "It even reached a point where living and working for the LRA was nice" (George, ll. 622–623). George offered two explanations why life in the LRA was, at least at times, enjoyable. First, his profession allowed him to live a good life, to eat treasured foods like smoked meat and chicken. In the literature, this participation in the spoils of war has been repeatedly identified as an important factor to understand why combatants choose to fight (see for instance Richards 2008, Utas 2005, Weinstein 2009). But it isn't the only explanation George gives. Second, and maybe more important, he enjoyed the successes he had on the battlefield, and the positive changes they

meant for the group – for instance that a large group of combatants was equipped with weapons. By “work”, George referred to the tasks he was given as a combatant of the LRA, his ‘job’. Their successes on the battlefield instilled some kind of worker’s pride in him. By becoming a committed insider and doing a good job, George was able to feel good about himself, and about the part he played in the LRA’s successes. Over time, he also came to identify with its agenda to overthrow the government, and only began to think about escape once he realised that it wouldn’t happen.

For others, like Charity, this appreciation of life in the bush was also based on an identification with the rules of life in combat:

To be honest, if there was a way I could go back to be a soldier, I would go back to be a soldier. I say this because soldiers are so respectful and loyal, but civilians here are not loyal at all. Soldiers would listen to what someone is saying and follow rules. For instance when you told them to stop, they stopped immediately without making even one more step. (Charity, ll. 735–748)

Interestingly, Charity brought up this topic herself, when we asked her whether she was at some point punished for transgressing the LRA’s rules – which she confirmed just to continue with the above statement. For her, military life seemed somewhat easier to handle; there were rules to be followed and sanctions for transgression. As soldiers, they would honour a code of conduct, unlike civilians, who, as she argued, sometimes behaved unpredictably and unfairly. Charity emphasised that she did not identify with the goals of the LRA – in fact, she felt remorseful over the pain and suffering their actions had caused – but she became very much comfortable with life as a combatant and its rules. She even tried (but failed) to join the UPDF after returning from captivity. For her, life as a soldier seemed more rewarding than life as a civilian. This kind of alienation from civilian life is a central achievement of the socialisation within the LRA, whose effects often outlived people’s time in the bush.

## Summary

In this chapter, I have tried to show how former combatants cope with the violent demands of the organisation by means of their narrative. I have argued that they routinely engage in techniques of neutralisation to make their offences or their



moral repercussions disappear. Why do combatants engage in these techniques of neutralisation? First, they are invested in maintaining a positive self-image – an effort that is constantly challenged by their past violent lifestyle. In this sense, their stories are vivid displays of their “struggle against place” (Presser 2008: 115), that is, their efforts to claim moral decency under conditions that allowed, forced, or tempted them to behave immorally. Second, the interviewees’ accounts show how they tried to create cognitive consonance between their actions and their attitudes. These efforts to create coherence might, as I have argued, also give way to the adaptation of violent role identities and, for some, their identification with the LRA. Here, the use of techniques of neutralisation interlocks with and fosters processes of self-identification with the group.

At the same time, former combatants’ identity work is a means to cope not just with violent demands *in situ*, but also with their return to civilian life. By situating their violence, former combatants’ stories become a means for them to reconcile themselves – or better, their selves – with their violent past.

## 4.5 Wives at night, soldiers during the day: The roles and positioning of female combatants

### Abstract

In this chapter, I will take a step back and address the particular challenges faced by female combatants. Women play a vital role in today's armed conflicts; in fact, around 40 percent of all combatants in contemporary civil wars are female (Hobson 2005: 1). Yet, their roles are often obscured or misunderstood. This is no less true for the case of the LRA, where women have often been portrayed as 'sex slaves' (see for instance Human Rights Watch 2009, Jackson 2002, Schmitz 2013, Vinci 2005) or mere spoils of war, i.e., means of remuneration for their male, fighting compatriots. In this chapter, I show the importance of female combatants and gendered roles for the creation of everyday life in the LRA. Women's presence and the roles they play both confirm and challenge Acholi notions of gendered roles, intimate relationships, and family life. Female combatants are far from being mere subjects in and victims to these dynamics, as they make active decisions on the roles they play. They are important assets for everyday life in the LRA, but they are also vital fighting forces. While they are often even more restricted in their actions than their male colleagues, they command a number of resources that allow them to exercise agency, for instance, by withdrawing themselves from the war zone, both literally and narratively.

### Women in the LRA: Recruitment, retention, return

How important are female combatants for the LRA? As is true for many other armed groups in Africa and around the world, women and girls are vital to the group, both in qualitative and in quantitative terms.<sup>68</sup> The SWAY (Annan et al. 2008, 2006) suggests that around one-third of male youth and one-fifth of female youth in northern Uganda have been abducted at some point, with abduction length ranging from one day to more than two decades. The fact that females have been abducted in smaller numbers is a consequence of the LRA's recruitment strategy. For one, young boys were the primary target of abductions, since they were assumed to be both easy to impress and physically fit enough to be-

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<sup>68</sup>That applies, for instance, to armed groups in Congo, Sierra Leone, and Mozambique. See Cohen (2013), Coulter (2009), Marks (2013) on Sierra Leone; West (2000) on Mozambique; and Baaz and Verweijen (2013) on Congo.

come capable and loyal fighters. Girls, on the other hand, were abducted only if they fell into a more narrowly defined age bracket, being not too young and weak to keep up with the group's pace, but also not old enough to have their own family yet. As argued before, limiting abductions to young, preferably pre-pubescent girls was part of the LRA's strategy to prevent the spread of STIs.<sup>69</sup> The majority of women experienced their first abduction between 10 and 18 years of age, and abduction rates peak for girls aged 11 to 16 (Annan et al. 2008: 33–34).

While abductions of girls and women lasted on average for a shorter period than those of boys and men, females stayed for a longer period once they had remained in captivity for more than a few months (Annan et al. 2008: 26). That is, if women didn't succeed in escaping early on, or weren't released after a couple of days or weeks, their chances of returning to civilian life diminished at a greater rate. The female interviewees included in the study had spent between 3 and 19 years in the bush (see Table 1). There are several reasons for that: For one thing, women were more closely supervised even when they had spent more time in the group. In part, their supervision was ordered for reasons of safety: Many women did not have their own gun,<sup>70</sup> and were accompanied to the fields or the well by escorts tasked with protecting them from other armed actors and with preventing them from escaping. At the same time, a smaller share of women actively participated in battles, especially when they were already visibly pregnant or had given birth. This was an important factor for escape. From the accounts of many combatants, battlefield situations seemed to have offered the best opportunities to take off without anyone noticing.<sup>71</sup> As a result, for many women, opportunities to escape were limited to night-time. Moreover, escape became more difficult once they had given birth, both on an emotional and a practical level. By becoming mothers, women were severely "inconvenience[d]" (Nancy, ll. 1083) in their motivation and attempts to escape. By comparison, men didn't feel obligated in the same way to take care of their children, and usually didn't consider them in their plans to escape back home.<sup>72</sup> While some

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<sup>69</sup>Though HIV infection rates in Uganda have famously declined for the last decades (a trend that has been reversed only recently, with new infection rates rising by 21 percent between 2005 and 2013, but decreasing again since 2011), overall prevalence is, at 7 percent, still high, and young women between 15 and 24 years of age are affected disproportionately (Uganda Aids Commission 2015, UNAIDS 2014: 31, UNAIDS 2017: 43–44).

<sup>70</sup>According to the SWAY, the proportion of youth that was given a gun varied significantly with age and length of abduction, between 26 and 81 percent (Annan et al. 2006: 55).

<sup>71</sup>In the SWAY sample, approximately one-third of combatants escaped while left alone, and roughly the same number escaped in battle or during an ambush (Annan et al. 2006: 62).

<sup>72</sup>Among the male interviewees, one reported giving his child to a woman to return home

women decided to commit their children to the care of other female combatants who escaped or were released, they rarely left them behind. Return to civilian life was not only complicated by forced marriage and motherhood, but was also perceived as less rewarding: In captivity, married women had someone to take care of them and their children – a situation that was, in sum, often favourable to what they expected from civilian life. Under these circumstances, escape was seen as a high-risk strategy with insecure gains.

While it seems to have been harder for women to escape, they were released more often than their male colleagues. Among the SWAY respondents, 27 percent of women who were abducted for more than two weeks stated that they had been released, while less than five percent of all male abductees did (Annan et al. 2008: 31–35). After women were given to a man as wives, their chances of being released dropped to seven percent (Annan et al. 2008: 36). Typically, releases were ordered when the group was in a state of crisis and couldn't afford to take care of inactive (especially injured) fighters anymore, or when women and mothers lost their husbands in combat and, thereby, their support system. Pregnant women and mothers of young children also couldn't keep up with the group's pace and lacked the strength needed for the arduous marches. In these cases, their children were mostly released with them.<sup>73</sup> Among the 19 women included in the study, six reported that they had been released, while none of the 24 male interviewees did (see Table 1).

We don't have any reliable numbers on the percentage of female combatants in the LRA, but judging from the abduction, retention and survival rates, it seems legitimate to assume that women made up at least one third of the combatants. While abduction rates were and are considerably lower, and return through release was reported more often for female combatants, retention rates can be assumed to be higher. That is both because fewer women died in captivity (in particular in combat) and their opportunities and incentives to escape were fewer. A number of combatants confirmed that there were more men than women in their group (without being able to give a more precise ratio). Taking into account that – at least until the early 2000s – almost all male fighters had at least one wife (Annan et al. 2008: 42), male combatants shouldn't outweigh female combatants

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with her.

<sup>73</sup>Though this might not have applied to children born in captivity who reached recruitment age; unfortunately, I don't know of any reports on that scenario. From past releases, we know that children below the age of ten were usually released with their mothers (Ronan 2016: 15).

by much. Whatever the exact numbers, women clearly played, and continue to play, an important part in the LRA, both in numbers and, as I will show below, in effect.

### **Female roles: Soldiers, *ting-ting*, wives, and mothers**

As part of the LRA, women took on both military and supporting (mostly domestic) roles. In the military sphere, they acted as fighters and other military personnel: spies, guards, and intelligence officers, among others. In the domestic realm, they were *ting-ting* (domestic servants and babysitters) or wives and mothers. Which roles women and girls were assigned to depended on their age or assumed maturity. Young girls, usually up to the age of 14 or 15, were assigned to a household to help the wives with their duties – cooking, fetching water, washing clothes, and taking care of their children. They didn’t keep this role, though, but were usually married to one of the male combatants once they were considered mature enough. In general, girls were thought to be fit for marriage upon their first menstrual period. However, some of them reported that they were given as wives even before that time (as young as 11 or 12 years of age), either because they looked ‘big’ (i.e., sexually mature), or because the man of the household they were assigned to decided to make them his wife.

The experiences and narratives of the women we talked to differed vastly: While some said they were equally soldiers and wives, others were absolved from responsibilities on the battlefield once they became wives or mothers. The standard operating procedures on how to handle (impending) motherhood seem to have differed depending on time, unit, intensity of war, location, and status of the husband (and, by extension, the wife). ‘Original’ wives recruited in the early years of the insurgency seem to have more often assumed active combat roles from which women abducted later on were largely exempted (Baines 2016: 51–76). They lost their autonomy once the LRA shifted up to Sudan, where they could continue to fight, but were demobilised once they became pregnant (Baines 2016: 38).<sup>74</sup> Some women actively decided to pursue a career as a soldier, and the leadership didn’t seem to have objected to it in general. One of the interviewees even argued: “Women were our strongest fighters!” (Simon, ll. 194–195). In the sample of Annan et al. (2008), one-sixth of all women reported having performed

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<sup>74</sup>Cakaj (2017b) has suggested that this withdrawal of women from combat roles in Sudan was a concession made to their mostly Muslim hosts.

in combat roles, i.e., as fighters, fighter's aides, or spies. However, women could typically not rise in rank above second lieutenant,<sup>75</sup> and did not profit as much from the assignment of ranks as male fighters did. Among the 19 female interviewees, six reported having held a rank (namely, one as lance corporal, one as second lieutenant, and two each as sergeant and lieutenant).

In particular, active combat roles didn't relieve women of their responsibilities as wives. They had to perform competing roles as soldiers *and* wives and mothers simultaneously. "[W]e are only wives at night, but during the day, we are soldiers", as Patience (ll. 237–239) said. Women who fought were always required to function in at least a dual capacity: as wives to their given husbands, mothers to their children, and as fighting forces in combat and in support roles. These roles could, and often would, interfere with each other: "For instance when you are under attack from the government soldiers you really find it hard to run with the child, or the children, depending on the number you have" (Charity, ll. 689–693). Still, a number of women actively chose to participate in combat. In part, this decision was a strategic one motivated by seeking out opportunities to escape. But many women also described how they felt empowered by their role as soldiers: "If you are trained and given a gun then you know you are already a soldier. Kony used to say that if you are in captivity you are his soldier, because you are there and even your husband has no say" (Sarah, ll. 313–317). While captivity created new dependencies for the women, their roles also allowed them to assume positions of authority and power. To some degree, their roles in the military sphere seem to have relieved female combatants from their obligations in the domestic realm, or at least provided them with some standing.

### **Hierarchies within: First wives, co-wives and *ting-ting***

While only a few female combatants held high military ranks and responsibilities, they were treated with different levels of respect depending on their position in the community. This position was based, to a large degree, on that of their husband and their place among the wives (if he had more than one). In the domestic realm, some senior or 'first wives' commanded their own staff, which consisted of co-wives, *ting-ting*, and escorts. Women married to high-ranking commanders

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<sup>75</sup>More recently, there have been exceptions to this rule, for instance, with the promotion of Aimee, a Congolese wife to Kony, to the position of a deputy of Lukwang, a high-ranking bodyguard and intelligence director (Cakaj 2015b: 12).

could even have the wives and babysitters of lower-ranking commanders at their disposal.

Wives and *ting-ting* often shared a hut, and spent their days working together. For many women, these cohabitation arrangements were a source of both solidarity and shared responsibilities. Life had the potential to become easier when a husband brought more wives into his household because individual women could share both domestic duties (like washing and cooking) and expectations of sexual availability. Moreover, it was easier to address severe maltreatment if they were not on their own. Within their household or unit, women told us how they provided each other with advice on how to avoid getting into trouble and how to deal with domestic abuse. They shared goods such as food and soap, but also thoughts, memories and plans to escape. They provided each other with comfort and vital assistance, at times even at their own risk. They took care of each other's children, and sometimes entrusted them with their lives in case one of them was released or escaped. These support networks were important for their physical and emotional survival. It is not surprising that many of these relationships outlasted the time spent in captivity, and provide a lot of women with emotional support up to today.

But mutual support, friendship and care was only one side of family and community life in the bush. In many households, there was also a lot of rivalry and physical abuse among the women and girls. Though combatants were strongly discouraged from quarrelling, and could be severely punished if their fights became known, emotional and physical abuse was a common concern. Quite often, women described having suffered a lot at the hands of their more senior co-wives, and younger women in particular often attributed their abuse to feelings of jealousy (*nyek*, the term used for co-wives, also means jealousy). Typically, it was the first wife to a commander who had the authority to assign tasks, and some women described being overloaded with work and pushed around at will. It seems that many of the senior wives felt threatened in their position by the addition of more and younger wives to the household (see also Baines 2014: 9–10). Senior wives, in contrast, justified the abuse of younger wives with their position of responsibility: in case of any transgression, senior wives were often punished for the mistakes of their younger co-wives (Baines 2016: 60).

On numerous occasions, women described how they had to hold their ground against their co-wives, and that they had to carefully weigh their reactions when

they felt they were treated unfairly. Ivy reported what happened when she told her husband about the abuse she received from her co-wives: “One time I reported them to my husband. And he made them beat each other until they all beat themselves. But after that I couldn’t rest, I was tortured so much [by the other wives] afterwards, so I never reported again” (Ivy, ll. 484–489). What Ivy described is a recurrent motif in female accounts of their relationships with co-wives and, as I will show below, husbands: Women came to terms with some level of maltreatment to avoid being subjected to more abuse. While they clearly thought of their treatment as unfair or even abusive, they decided to stick it out rather than to risk a deterioration of the relationship.

When preadolescent girls were assigned to a household, they usually first served as *ting-ting*, that is, domestic servants and babysitters. They were placed under the command and care of the wife or wives of the commander heading the household. Sometimes, they developed something resembling a mother-daughter-relationship with these women. Some women said they preferred being a *ting-ting* over being a wife, as they could continue living a child-like life and were not “overused” (Faith, l. 1306) and subjected to sexual abuse in particular. Others said that they suffered the most while being a *ting-ting*, and that marriage provided some relief, especially from their abuse by the wives belonging to the same household. This seems have been one reason why some girls pushed for an early marriage (Baines 2014: 10).

### Female status passages: Becoming wives and mothers

Among the female interviewees, all of them were married in the bush, and all of them conceived between one and six children (though two of them only gave birth upon return; see Table 1). Becoming a wife was a status passage that happened as women and girls were initiated into the expectations of married life, of “living as husband and wife” (*bedo callo lacoo ki dako*) (Janet, ll. 446–447; Harriet, ll. 156–157; and Hope, ll. 341–342). More precisely, women and girls became wives through their first and often forced intercourse with their given husbands:

We went back and George commanded the first wife to show me how to lay the bed. [...] I patiently listened, not knowing that it was on this day that I would start living in that house as a wife. (...) In the evening when people were passing time in conversation, he returned home and wanted to sleep [with me in his house]. [...] I told him I



would not be sleeping there but would sleep where I usually slept. [...] During that argument and negotiation, I sat besides the interior of the hut. He was pretending to sleep. Afterwards he started pulling me at my clothes, scratching me to come onto the bed. I started crying. [...] He started intimidating and frightening me, saying if I refused to have sex he would kill me. He took a pistol and placed it on my cheek as an example and said if I refused to have sex with him then I would see what will happen next. (*With emotions heard of in her voice*) “It’s not a joking matter!” he exclaimed. (...) I took courage and sat down. He unexpectedly came closer and overturned me on the bed. After that he started stripping me naked forcefully. I never wanted it. I was pressing and squeezing my thighs to stop him just like this (*demonstrates*) while he was removing my clothes. [...] He slept with me forcefully. I started making noise, shouting and crying. [...] In the morning when I woke up, lots of blood started oozing out, pouring onto the floor. It wet the whole bed. (Janet, ll. 318–381)

In the evening I was told to go and bathe. [...] [W]hen people were cooking and it was approaching 8 pm in the evening, Odhiambo sent his wife Patricia to go and call me. [...] I went there and he asked me whether I knew why I was there. I told him I don’t know. He asked me again: “Do you think if we went to your parents and asked them to give you as wives to us, do you think they would? So now that you don’t know why you are here, you are my wife and you are going to sleep here tonight.” When he spoke to me like that I kept quiet. When he told me to lie down I sat instead and he grabbed me by my neck and said: “I can kill you, and who do you think can arrest or punish me?” So he grabbed me and cocked his gun and started to tear my clothes off. He then forced me to sleep with him, and that was when I got to know sex. (Patience, ll. 135–158)

Most women and girls already belonged to the household of the man who would become their husband before they became wives. Typically, their marriage was performed and confirmed through their first (and mostly forced) intercourse. Sex became the enactment of a “physical marriage”, as one elder woman put it (Porter 2013: 167). Since they were still very young and sometimes barely adolescent, their initiation as wives through rape often coincided with their first intercourse. As Patience said, this incidence “was when I got to know sex” (Patience, l. 158), and Janet’s given husband even complained to her that “I didn’t know how to play sex” (Janet, ll. 424–425). Sometimes, girls hadn’t yet experienced their first menstrual bleeding when they became pregnant, thus conceiving during the first menstrual cycle. Their narratives also show how senior wives became complicit in the abuse of their younger co-wives as they summoned them

and showed them how to lay the bed (see also Baines 2016: 96).

As is true for Patience and Janet, the performance of their first intercourse as wives was often also a demonstration of power by the husbands. A number of female interviewees recounted how their given husbands threatened to use violence and even to kill them if they resisted, or continued to resist, their sexual demands. For most of them, becoming a wife was as consequential and often violent a status passage as getting a gun and becoming a soldier. And just like these, it served the purpose of putting (female) combatants in their place, and taught them to persevere in the face of severe physical and emotional violations. The most important difference though is that the high command didn't even have to execute and monitor their transition from *ting-ting* to wives, at least not in detail. They just had to create the institutional setting in which this kind of violation became legitimate, expected, and even routine. That is, the male combatants themselves helped to create the institution of forced marriage. Even though most women understood these experiences as physical abuse, mostly, they decided to give in to it:

I was four years into babysitting after which I was given to a man and gave birth to a child. It wasn't easy. [...] I didn't know much about sex. I first refused to go to the man and I was harshly beaten. I still have the scars on my hand. I was severely beaten. My colleagues told me that if I refused to get along with the man, I would be killed. Just accept it, they said. [...] We underwent the same situation, they explained, if you want to stay alive, you should accept anything that you are told to do. (Faith, ll. 392–413)

Through the institution of forced marriage, sexual abuse became, though not accepted, normalised. Women stopped putting up resistance, both because they were afraid that they might be severely punished, but also because they felt that their abuse was unavoidable. They expected having to put up with physical and sexual abuse anyway, either from their husbands or from the next man they would be given to in case their relationship failed. They reasoned that they would bring more harm upon themselves by resisting: "Because sometimes if he called me to go and have sex with him, I would refuse to let him have sex with me, so in that process he beat me up until I felt like I could not take any more beating. That's when he got the chance of having sex with me, this happened because I couldn't [resist it anymore]" (Patience, ll. 200–207).

However, sexual abuse in and of itself was not sufficient to describe the relationship as bad. Often, relationships were more complex than the term ‘forced’ would suggest. Women mostly described their relationships as abusive, but also just as often as caring. Many women judged their relationships based on care, not affection: ‘It [the relationship with my husband] was good because he took care of me’ (Hope, ll. 380–381). In the absence of proper courtship (*cunna*) and kinship rituals, care became a central and probably the single most important aspect to describe their relationship. Some women became very attached to their husbands, and even fell in love with them, as Fiona did:

If it was not for my husband’s death, I would have been in the bush up to now, because I was being taken good care of by him. Life was a bit fair near him. I never wanted to come back, but because I lost him, I had no option. (Fiona, extract from an interview with a case manager at a reintegration facility)

Fiona started to cry when she talked about her husband’s death. They had planned to escape together, but unfortunately, he was caught and tortured for weeks until he was finally hanged. She was punished severely and had to watch him die because the commanders suspected she was aware of his plans to escape. His death and the loss of his companionship were crucial for her final decision to escape. With him around and taking care of her, she didn’t even consider escaping back home. Fiona’s account also points to the crucial role care played in her love for him: “I loved him so much because he took good care of me.” While her account of a loving and caring relationship is rather exceptional, some women seem to have been satisfied with their partners. In this respect, relationships in the bush didn’t differ fundamentally from those in civilian life, where divorces require a high level of abuse or neglect on the side of the husband, or severely strained relationships with his family (Porter 2013: 123).

Among the women who were turned into wives, approximately half gave birth in captivity (Annan et al. 2008: 43). The rates can be assumed to be higher for those who spent more time in captivity, as many of the female interviewees did.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup>At least in part, the high proportion of wives and mothers interviewed for this study is a sampling effect; forced wives who spent on average more time in captivity were also more likely to have been registered upon their return with a reception centre (Annan et al. 2008: 37), which was one of the channels we used for finding interviewees. The higher registration rate in turn is an effect of targeting by the reception centres themselves, which saw more need for assistance for long-term abductees and more vulnerable populations such as young mothers.

Female combatants approached pregnancy and motherhood in different ways: while some were happy to be (partly) relieved from battle-related activities, others felt trapped and even more restrained by their new-found role and responsibilities. For some, motherhood came as a relief, as it provided them with a way out of having to actively participate in battle (Baines 2014). Although being a fighter and receiving a rank came with some privileges,

[s]ometimes it puts your life in danger because there are other tasks that are given only to people with ranks. [...] When I got a child life became a little easier. [...] [As mothers,] we were prohibited from [...] going to battle and walking from Sudan to Uganda. We were tasked with only one thing; looking after the children and also leading the soldiers who remained at home. (Charity, ll. 476–491)

It also came with some other privileges; mothers received preferential treatment, for instance, in the distribution of food and other resources. Others emphasised the challenges that came with motherhood. In their homes, women had a number of exclusive responsibilities, in particular, taking care of their children. For them, being responsible not only for their own well-being, but for that of another dependent human being was discussed as an additional burden:

When I got a baby things became harder. I had to carry so many things, for example jerry cans or cooking utensils. I also had to [do these things] before that, but it was so hard with a child. [...] If you are under attack your life can be so hard. Yes, then [before you had a child] you only think about yourself. But with a child, if there is no food the child will cry, and if the child cries, they beat you for that. (Prisca, ll. 355–388)

For many women, pregnancy and motherhood turned out to be a liability, both in combat and in their everyday activities. While most of them stopped actively participating in combat once they became mothers, they had to pack their belongings and run if their hideouts or settlements were attacked by the opposing forces; “and if you had a child, you had to tie that child very hard to your body” (Sarah, ll. 468–470). Women also faced a high risk of getting killed when the battlefield shifted to their settlements, or of being separated from their children in combat, often without reuniting with them later or even finding out about their fate. In their everyday lives, women were confronted with insufficient means to take care of and to protect their children, and with

unrealistic expectations, such as keeping them quiet at all times:

When bathing a child, it should not cry or make noise day and night. [...] We were really beaten because of the children we had. Simply because they cried and reported our location while in the bush. If a child cries while on your back or arm, you would be severely flogged. [...] They beat you because you made your child cry. Even if you covered their mouth, the sound would still be heard. If you wanted to bathe the child, you should cover the mouth as you bathe it. It is inevitable and undeniable for the child to cry. I really suffered [a lot of] strokes because of my child. (Faith, ll. 577–597)

For most female combatants, becoming a mother was not a choice, but a reality they had to adjust to. This reality created opportunities – such as being excused from activities on the battlefield, or being given preferential treatment –, but also confronted them with a number of additional challenges and responsibilities.

### **Being a wife and being at war: Intimate relationships in civilian life and in the bush**

Organisationally, the institutionalisation of intimate relationships in forced marriages served a number of purposes: (1) to prevent struggles over sexual partners which might threaten cohesion within the group, (2) to maintain discipline by enforcing rules on sexual relations, thereby effectively preventing unauthorised rape against members and civilians alike (Kramer 2012), (3) to contain the spread of STIs, which were a common cause of death, (4) to emphasise and enforce the organisation's claim to total control, (5) to remunerate male combatants in the absence of material incentives, (6) to bind both women and men to the organisation by creating lasting commitments through matrimony and parenthood, and (7) to build a 'new Acholi' (see Allen and Schomerus 2006: 16, Baines 2014, Olsen 2007: 3) and to rebuild the organisation through procreation.<sup>77</sup> Though not all of these purposes were created intentionally, they proved to be functional.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup>The goal of creating a new Acholi (*Acholi manyen*) seems to have been more pronounced during some phases of the insurgency than others, and forced marriage only became standard once the LRA established more permanent bases in South Sudan (Baines 2014: 9).

<sup>78</sup>However, forced marriages also had dysfunctional effects, as they created new incentives to escape from abuse, or with one's family and children. As a military strategy, the abduction of females proved to be somewhat counterproductive, since it made fighters more vulnerable (Aijazi and Baines 2017: 480). Hence, women and young children were often released in times of crisis.

But most importantly, I would argue, forced marriages were a means to create continuity with civilian ways of living and were thereby vital for the constitution of everyday life in the LRA. Intimate relationships and gender-specific roles in the LRA both created some continuity with the traditional, “Acholi way” (*kit Acholi*) of living and broke with fundamental aspects of it. In this section, I will try to show how rules and regulations in the LRA both drew on Acholi traditions and purposively violated them. This “repurposing of culture” (Oloya 2013: 74–78), of adjusting culture to the organisation’s needs, created some normalcy, but one that was distinct from home and thereby made combatants’ detachment from civilian life even more complete. Repurposed cultural spaces engaged with social conventions in a way that combatants could quite easily adjust to, but they were reminded continuously of the uncircumventable nature of life in the bush. Forced marriage was maybe the most important field to repurpose culture, and gendered expectations played a vital part in it. While women held both roles in the domestic and military sphere, often being wives, mothers, and soldiers at the same time, gendered expectations clearly dominated their experiences. Women were expected to be obedient in their forced relationships, and a number of them shared with us instances of forced intercourse. Typically, these were limited to their relationship with their assigned husbands. Sexual relationships (consensual or forced) that happened outside of these approved unions were prohibited and could be punished harshly. In general, these punishments seem to have been less about protecting women from sexual abuse than about controlling an intimate aspect of people’s lives. It was not rape, but illicit relationships that challenged the leadership’s claim to total control over every aspect of the combatants’ lives.

Forced marriages, though almost always identified with life in the bush, are not unparalleled in civilian life in Acholiland. As Porter (2013, 2015) has noted, ‘marriage by capture’ was and, in many rural areas, still is a common practice.<sup>79</sup> Marriage by capture happens if a man won’t accept a woman’s refusal to be with him, and consequentially abducts and rapes her with the intention of forcing her into matrimony. This strategy is often successful because, in this case, rape is not primarily seen as the violation of an individual, but of a (moral) community. While tolerance of sexual and physical violence is low, particularly among young women (Annan et al. 2008: 64), community responses are more about restoring social harmony than seeking individual retribution. In this context, rape is seen

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<sup>79</sup>Statistics are hard to come by, but for her own sample of two villages, Porter (2013: 232) reported a prevalence of more than five percent.

rather as a foregoing of the proper rules of courtship than as a violation of one woman's right to self-determination. *It is wrong*, but for different reasons than the human rights discourse could suggest. Because the offence is more about the community than the individual, marriage is often seen as a suitable means to 'undo' the crime of capture and rape (Porter 2015: 88).

On the surface, the abduction of young women and girls by the LRA seems to follow the same pattern: women are forcibly abducted and then turned into wives by their captors.<sup>80</sup> Some of the male interviewees consequently refused the notion that they were 'given' wives: "Wives are not given; you have to abduct one" (Simon, ll. 86–87). But marriages in captivity didn't qualify for the same kind of social approval as marriages by capture in civilian life.<sup>81</sup> The civilian communities didn't perceive marriages in captivity as procedures that restored social harmony, but as further violations of the social order. They did not correct the wrong that was done, but created another manifestation of it. The refusal to acknowledge their unions as 'proper marriages' was voiced by Scovia:

In English, they call it marriage. But what I went through wasn't marriage. If it was to mean marriage then we should have had a wedding in church, or an introduction in church. This would mean there would be a positive change in the performance of the family, but with what I experienced, it wasn't even close to marriage. (Scovia, ll. 791–799)

Interestingly, Scovia does not focus on the lack of agreement and the sexual abuse she was subjected to (though she talked about it at another point), but on the foregoing of the necessary rituals. For her, their marriage lacked legitimacy because there was no ceremony, and no exchange between the involved families that approved and confirmed their union. Traditionally, marriage is understood as a union not only between two people, but also between their families (Porter 2015: 166–167); a woman does not only marry a man, but marries into and becomes part of his family. She will be married not just to a person, but to a home (Porter 2013: 195). By becoming forced wives, young women had a husband and started a family, but were not properly "married to a home" (Porter 2015:

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<sup>80</sup>Though her future husband would not necessarily be the same person who abducted a woman or girl, since the more senior and high-ranking soldiers had a prerogative on choosing women for themselves.

<sup>81</sup>In fact, many people refuse the idea that these two phenomena could be compared at all (Porter 2013: 263).

87). Proper marriage would also have required the payment of some kind of *luk* or dowry to confirm the relationship not only between the spouses, but between their families.<sup>82</sup> Without the payment of *luk*, a man will still be “living with her on credit” (George, ll. 40–41), regardless of the home and parental duties they share. Their relationship will still be considered volatile, and neither party will have the same rights or obligations as wives and husbands who have been properly married. Maybe even more importantly, “*luk* performs the work [...] of distinguishing illicit from acceptable sex” (Porter 2013: 196). It is the lack of *luk* rather than the lack of consent that excludes marriages in the bush from the list of socially accepted relationships. In a way, forced marriages are seen as even worse than rape by strangers (Porter 2013: 256), because they constitute not just an individual transgression, but a threat to the moral community. As a result, these unions were often perceived as temporary, ‘bush marriages’ limited in time and space (Porter 2015: 87).

However, it would be wrong to conclude that these marriages remained mere orders from above without legitimacy among the combatants. If that had been true, more combatants would have resisted some of its implicit expectations. They could have decided to stay as a married couple without having an intimate relationship and conceiving children. That only a minority of them did so<sup>83</sup> points, as I would argue, to the power of norms and institutions that make the compliance with expectations of family life and intimacy normal, routine, and unquestioned. This is even more true for a social reality that has, at least for the time being, no alternative. Although most combatants were aware of how their way of life differed from life at home, their decision-making capacities were limited to the options available to them in the bush. While these marriages might have been understood as temporary, they transcended people’s lives in the bush, in particular if they resulted in lasting commitments such as children. The overwhelming majority of combatants annulled their relationships upon return

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<sup>82</sup>*Luk*, commonly translated as bridewealth or dowry, is a customary payment made by the aspiring husband to the family of his future wife. There are different forms of *luk* required during different stages of the relationship (intercourse, cohabitation, conception), and each payment confirms and deepens the social bond between the families (Aijazi and Baines 2017: 39, Otuko 2016, Porter 2013: 191–196).

<sup>83</sup>Accounts of decision-making processes are rare. From the SWAY sample, we can estimate that more than 50 percent of all women who became forced wives gave birth in captivity (Annan et al. 2008: 43). Taking into account that some marriages only lasted for a short time (due to the escape or death of one of the spouses) and that cases of infertility or subfertility on one or both sides made conception impossible or improbable for some, a clear majority of forced marriages led to intercourse and parenthood.



from captivity (Annan et al. 2008: 44), but some decided to stay with their given spouses. Among the interviewees, one reported that he stayed with his wife after returning from captivity; two of them told us that they decided to live with somebody they met in the bush, but weren't formally affiliated with back then. In these cases, the relationship was formalised in accordance with customary rules, with the husband reaching out to his wife's family, asking for their approval and paying (or promising to pay) the agreed upon *luk*. Other women did not consider remarrying unless they could be united with their husband from captivity. Even though they did not know whether their husbands were still alive or would eventually return and continue living with them (or didn't even wish to do so themselves), they saw entering into a new relationship as adultery.<sup>84</sup>

In this sense, the regulation of intimate relationships served as an internal control mechanism that matched gendered expectations and roles in broader society (Dolan 2009: 93). This continuity with civilian ways of living was, as I have argued before,<sup>85</sup> crucial for the combatants' immersion in the group. By mimicking the paternalistic structures of civilian life, institutionalised gendered expectations allowed male combatants in particular "to feel at home away from home" (Oloya 2013: 89). For them, relationships provided some kind of normalcy: "Life was seemingly normal with her. She didn't have the idea of returning back home, and I didn't either" (Joseph, ll. 660–662). Women suffered a lot more from the dynamics of institutionalised submission and abuse, but they also appreciated and felt comforted by some aspects of the roles and positions assigned to them.

### Women's narrative (dis-)engagement from the war zone

Though female combatants were less involved in combat situations, they experienced and committed similar levels of violence as their male colleagues (Annan et al. 2009: 9). In their narratives, however, the violence they experienced figures more prominently, and only a few of them talked about violence they perpetrated themselves. Though we can assume that individuals' own acts of violence are somewhat underreported, this seems to be even more true for female than for male combatants. What explains this difference? Faith's narrative might prove instructive, as she explains:

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<sup>84</sup>However, such statements may also be a strategy to fend off expectations of entering a new relationship and building a new family.

<sup>85</sup>See Chapter 4.2 starting on page 90.

[M]ost of the women wouldn't engage in fights, not even on a single day. They trained them but never engaged them at the warfront. This is because most of the women did not take more than six months before they fell pregnant or had given birth. So at what time would you get engaged in military fights? [...] The women would help them do things like cooking, carrying their tin or bullet tins to go to fronts. That's it. (Faith, ll. 1209–1230)

Faith argued that women simply didn't have the opportunity to engage in fights due to their roles as wives and mothers. As soon as they became wives, they would inevitably fall pregnant and thereby become unavailable for fighting roles. Though she makes an important point towards women's diminished roles as fighters once they became mothers, in her narrative, women disappear not only from the battlefield, but as violent actors more generally. Through her narrative, she disengages herself from violent action both on and off the battlefield. In this sense, female combatants command another means to prove themselves as decent persons: namely, to emphasise their role identities as wives and mothers over, and in conflict with, the violent actions they were expected to perform. Women not only were less present on the battlefield, but used gendered expectations to write themselves out of the war zone.

## Summary

In this chapter, I have argued that women played vital roles in the LRA, both on and off the battlefield. As soldiers, *ting-ting*, wives and mothers, female combatants were challenged to perform in different and often conflicting roles at the same time. Depending on their assessment and experiences, female combatants would prefer some roles and tasks over others and work up to them where possible. Though only a few of them attained high military ranks, some of them held positions of power, most importantly in the domestic realm. Relationships between the females belonging to a household and with others could make the challenges they faced even more daunting, but they were as often a source of strength and mutual care. By becoming wives and mothers, women were subject to another status passage or passages that were even more consequential for their immersion in the socio-emotional universe of the LRA. Women's roles as wives and mothers were highly prestructured by the institution of forced marriage. Through it, the LRA "implicated women and girls in the organization of power and domination in the group" (Baines 2014: 1). By picking up on and adjusting civilian ways of building and sustaining intimate relationships, forced marriage became an im-

portant means to continue everyday life under different terms. Forced marriages helped combatants come to understand the bush as home while simultaneously binding them to the organisation. As women were both required in a social and military function, they were even more restricted than their male colleagues. But they also commanded some genuine means to make these challenges work for them; most interestingly, by writing themselves off the battlefield. These strategies show that women were more than mere victims and passive bystanders to the processes and dynamics within the LRA.

## 4.6 Refusing means, not ends: Politics, spirit beliefs, and legitimate authority



Figure 4.2: Museventh day (photo by Ledio Cakaj)

### Abstract

In the preceding chapters, I have shown how combatants were drawn into the realm of the LRA through their immersion in everyday life – its rules, norms and routines – and how they coped with and adjusted to their violent lifestyle. To be sure, their active and passive commitment was not completely apolitical. Most combatants had and continue to have a conflicted relationship with the LRA. While they have been forcibly recruited and see their abduction as a violation, they relate in some way to the organisation's struggle, and often attribute some legitimacy to their cause. These legitimacy beliefs are neither uncontested affirmations of nor enthusiastic commitments to the LRA's agenda. But they position the combatants in a space in between, where both their abduction and the LRA's fight are not just “wanton and senseless”, as Kalyvas (1999) put it. These partial legitimacies were, as I will argue, a central element for combatants' however sketchy identification with the LRA.



Figure 4.3: Graffiti on a wall of the compound of the NMPDC (photo by the author)

I identify and detail three sources of legitimacy: (1) oppression and marginalisation of the Acholi, (2) spirit beliefs, and (3) authoritative performances. These legitimacy beliefs were confronted with different sources of delegitimisation – in particular, violent acts against civilians and colleagues, and the lack of progress towards the LRA’s proclaimed goals. Legitimacy beliefs were often inextricably linked to each other. Together, I argue, they provide crucial clues to understanding combatants’ motivations to stay or leave.

### **Like mangoes standing between two stones: Power struggles and identity politics**

Various actors have branded the LRA an apolitical movement. Indeed, over the years, it has become increasingly unclear whether the LRA still aims at overthrowing the government, or if – as some have argued – it is in a mere survival mode (Cakaj 2017c, Lancaster et al. 2011, Vinci 2007), trying to live off war and escaping criminal prosecution. For most former combatants, though, the political dimension of the insurgency was very much vital, even among those who returned many years ago. When we asked the interviewees whether they thought Kony or the LRA was fighting for a good cause, most of them answered in the affirmative. A recurring motif in their answers was the violations perpetrated by the government forces during the early years of the conflict. Many combatants

elaborated on how Museveni's troops have committed a lot of atrocities against the Acholi people, have been mistreating civilians, stealing and spoiling foodstuffs, raiding cattle, and raping men and women alike.<sup>86</sup> Though they did not get involved in the insurgency on their own initiative, they saw the fight against the NRA/M as a legitimate one:

[To overthrow the government,] That was also my personal goal. [...] Because since 1996 [probably 1986] the government troops have killed a lot of people here in this village, they came and killed people and they also raided the cattle in this land. Even here they have raided our cattle. Back then, people were not running away from the LRA soldiers, they were running away from the government troops. (George, ll. 598–610)

George claimed that he did not join the LRA voluntarily; however, he described how he became a committed fighter who also believed in their mission to overthrow the Ugandan government. For him, the LRA's fight was legitimate because it sought to address the large-scale abuse of Acholi by the NRM. This argument was reiterated by many interviewees. To them, it was all the more valid since the ICC warrants against high-ranking LRA commanders were still in place and Dominic Ongwen was tried at The Hague, while atrocities committed by the NRA were insufficiently investigated by national and international actors alike:

All the issues the ICC was concerned with happened after 2002. All those crimes and atrocities committed before 2002 were not taken seriously for that matter. Why did they agree on the year 2002 to prosecute? This means that all the atrocities the UPDF and NRA did against the civilians in the 1980s and beyond were not taken into consideration. Thus not all [wrongdoings] did come out in the open. [...] As people who were abducted, many things happened to us, we underwent serious problems but our parents don't have a voice to appeal on our cases anywhere. If you lost your child, that's it. You need not ask. (Scovia, ll. 1252–1272)

Scovia herself told us that she had lost a child she gave birth to in the bush, which disappeared as they scattered in battle. Here, she speaks not only as

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<sup>86</sup>Male-to-male rape in particular was seen as despicable, which also has to do with attitudes towards homosexual relationships and non-reproductive sexual practices (such as masturbation and anal intercourse) more generally (see Nyanzi 2013: 955–956, Porter 2013: 177). See also Chapter 3 starting on page 43.

a ‘lost child’, but as a mother who lost a child. It is a fate she shares with many of her colleagues who, like her, see a double standard in the approaches to crimes committed by the NRA as compared to those committed by the LRA. This perceived bias has made them question the legal basis for and the impartiality of criminal prosecution, and added to the sense of discrimination against Acholi in Ugandan politics. As the interviewees argued, these injustices did not end with the counterinsurgency against the LRA, but continue up to today, with the exclusion of the North from the national progress: “we are always side-lined of any development” (Andrew, ll. 1296–1297). The long-standing and lasting neglect of Acholi in national politics is understood by many as one of the most important reasons for the insurgency and its continuation up to the present:

I also remember that during the time when I was still in captivity, Kony said he would not have started this rebellion but what made him get into it was the regional differences. The Acholi are discriminated against by other tribes. That was the reason why he decided to start this rebellion, so that he can become president, leading on this side of Gulu. Museveni would lead the other side of Kampala and beyond, because of these differences that have separated us. The way I also see it, there is inequality on many issues including the roads, hospitals, and environment. I travelled through Masaka<sup>87</sup> and beyond and realised there is a big difference. There is at least some difference. (Faith, ll. 1165–1182)

Faith was one of the most informed and vocal former combatants we talked to. After her return, she became part of a women’s advocacy group, and acted as a spokesperson for concerns and political claims of former combatants. As such, she was quite outspoken and determined about the structural violations she and others witnessed. As Acholi and northern Ugandans, former combatants saw their rights violated by the incumbent government in multiple forms: The government had denied equal and non-discriminatory treatment to all Ugandans regardless of ethnicity, which led to the insurgency in the first place. During the conflict, it had failed to protect them from abduction, and created debilitating living conditions for those forced to live in the camps.<sup>88</sup> And it continued to put them at a disadvantage by providing insufficient support and infrastructural

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<sup>87</sup>Masaka is a district and a large town (with approximately 100’000 inhabitants) in the Central Region of Uganda, 140 kilometres southwest of Kampala.

<sup>88</sup>See also Chapters 3, starting on page 43, and Chapter 4.4, starting on page 121.

investments for them to compete on a national stage.<sup>89</sup> In addressing these injustices, the interviewees referred to their ethnic identity as Acholi (or, more broadly, as northern Ugandans). They were keenly aware of the particular challenges they faced as former combatants, but addressed these injustices as experiences that they shared with the non-combatant population:

We [former combatants] do share ideas and we feel we are equal to other people in the community who didn't go through what we went through. While we were in captivity, those who were at home also had serious problems and challenges. They were in camps. [...] We feel there wasn't any difference because all these troubles were equally felt. [...] The troubles, problems you faced while at home are equal to the problems and challenges we faced while in captivity. So I feel everything is the same. (Janet, ll. 1417–1451)

Here, the marginalisation and violation of northern Ugandans becomes a means to offset the structural differences between those who are, as combatants, at war and those who are, as civilians, merely subjected to it. By comparing the combatants' suffering and problems to those of the civilian population, Janet tries to reconcile victim and perpetrator positions, thereby revaluating the LRA's cause. As the interviewees argued, the Acholi people's experiences of discrimination, neglect and violation equipped the LRA's actions with some legitimacy of just cause by oppression. It also affected how people looked at their involvement as citizens in national politics: "We are like mangoes standing between two stones; our eyes are seeing, our ears are listening but the question is how are we going to live? It is a big blow to us who are in the so-called opposition and not in the government" (Andrew, ll. 1212–1218). Here, Andrew was talking about his expectations concerning the (at that time imminent) presidential elections of 2016. But more generally, he was talking about the situation of the Acholi people. For many interviewees, the situations they find themselves in today – both as former combatants and as Acholi – shared the same origin with the LRA's insurgency. With their marginalisation in national politics still unaddressed, and the violations by the NRA/UPDF against them still largely unaccounted for, they felt that the LRA was right to fight. Their narratives, however, were often ambiguous, and this overall belief was both complemented and questioned by internal dynamics within the LRA.

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<sup>89</sup>I will describe this in more detail in Chapter 4.7 starting on page 178.



**Spirit beliefs, charismatic leadership and performance-based legitimacy**

Throughout the last years, the public perception of the LRA has focused to a large degree on its leader, Joseph Kony. In 2012, a contested campaign by Invisible Children, an NGO with long-standing engagement in the conflict in northern Uganda, created a stir in the Global North. Its goal was to ‘make Kony famous’, and it advocated focusing the fight against the LRA on the hunt for Joseph Kony.<sup>90</sup> The campaign has received widespread attention and criticism for its saviour motif, its simplified portrayal of the conflict, and not least for its short-sighted obsession with Kony as the heart and head of the movement.<sup>91</sup> It created the impression that the armed insurgency was caused and kept alive by the actions of a single mad man, and glossed over the political and ethnic conflict at its roots.

Clearly, the LRA is about more than one person’s grudge over the leadership of Uganda. But throughout its history, Kony has been a crucial, most possibly decisive figure for the LRA. Without him, ethnic politics in Uganda would still be as contentious, and someone else might be leading the armed resistance against Museveni’s government. But the LRA wouldn’t be the same, and it is doubtful whether it would have survived all the crises it has faced in the past and present. In the narratives of many interviewees, Kony was a prominent figure that was met with a mixture of fear, respect, admiration and amazement. Many of them portrayed him as a person with noble intentions, and believed that his fight against the Ugandan government was legitimate. This faith was based on a perception of persistent marginalisation of Acholi in the Ugandan state, but just as much on the spiritual powers vested in Kony. A number of interviewees described how all of his predictions so far had become true: “I see Kony as a good person, because actually everything he told us really happened. My husband was also killed at that time. He [Kony] foretold us the death of my husband and of other people” (Sarah, ll. 476–480). Since they had seen his predictions come true before, they were positive that he would eventually succeed in his plans to overthrow Museveni’s government:

And at some point I still feel he will take over this government, with time. Then the Acholi will be recognised better [by the government].

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<sup>90</sup>The campaign and the film can be found on Invisible Children’s homepage: <https://invisiblechildren.com/kony-2012/> (Russell 2012).

<sup>91</sup>For further reference, see Finnström (2012), Kagumire (2012), Mamdani (2012), Schomerus et al. (2012).

Kony once said that in the time to come, all his commanders will leave him at some point, others will come back home, and again others will get killed. But he will eventually take over the government with his children. (...) He kept saying that over and over again. He also said that some people who will come back home, they will not benefit from the support given to them through other people; instead those people who are supposed to deliver the support will use the assistance for different purposes.<sup>92</sup> Some of these things are happening exactly the way he said. (Patience, ll. 622–639)

The fact that Kony has survived for such a long time and against all odds, predictions and threats from powerful adversaries only adds to the myth that surrounds him. His improbable survival has become an important source of his legitimacy. Many combatants attributed his seeming invincibility to spirits that not only inform Kony's actions and orders, but protect him from harm in mutinies and during battles:<sup>93</sup>

The [government] troops may at times see him in the form of a swarm of bees. [One time,] I stood at a distance and witnessed that it was his spirits fighting. It wasn't a human being fighting. If you cross to where he is fighting, you will be shot dead. Bullets would all turn into his direction. You should not run towards that direction but move to the opposite direction and keep at a distance. (John, ll. 2500–2509)

These spirits were sought to protect Kony not only from enemy fire, but also from mutinies and betrayal from within:

It is not easy to turn against Kony because he gets to know. I earlier told you that Kony went alone to the bush, so there was something with him that protected him. He used to say that whoever wanted to return home was free to do so. [...] But for him it's the spirit that binds him and makes him stay in captivity. If you want to return, leave the guns behind he said. If you tried to escape and in turn also wanted to kill Kony or cause some harm to him, he would kill you. Many people tried. But now no one tries anymore because they know the repercussions. No one tries anymore. (John, ll. 2454–2471)

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<sup>92</sup>Meaning that assistance promised by relief actors (NGOs and governmental bodies) won't profit those in need of assistance, but will be used for the self-enrichment of those very actors instead.

<sup>93</sup>On the role of spirits and spirit beliefs in northern Uganda and the LRA, see Allen (1991), Behrend (1999), Finnström (2008).

It is higher authority that commits Kony to his mission, and that also makes any attempt at stopping him a lost cause. His spiritual guidance and protection add credibility to his fight. Because Kony is imagined to be instructed and shielded by powerful spirits, it would not only have been dangerous to go against him, but also misguided, since it would have tempted the spirits that protect him. Such spirit beliefs are not alien to Acholi society;<sup>94</sup> Acholi cosmology is an intricate web of Christian and spirit beliefs, in which spiritual protection and vengeance are understood as explanations for the good and bad things that happen to people (Finnström 2008, Oloya 2013, Victor and Porter 2017). Here, spiritual protection becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: “no one tries anymore because they know the repercussions” (John, ll. 2469–2470); and the fact that no one tries to question Kony’s grip on power assures people of his spiritual authority.

While spiritual powers and performances are clearly linked – it is Kony’s spirits that inform him about enemy actions and that protect him in battle – performance-based legitimacy stemmed primarily from his predictions rather than from the LRA’s military successes. Where former combatants voiced belief in Kony and his authority, they did so mainly because he was seen as capable of foreseeing the future, not because he was able to change its course. Here, performance-based legitimacy is not only and not necessarily dependent on military success. Kony’s performance as the LRA’s leader included not only his predictions and his (overall modest) successes on the battlefield, but also his leadership qualities. Many combatants described Kony as a charismatic personality that liked to share stories and jokes, distinguished himself through acts of kindness (especially towards women), spared civilians from atrocities and colleagues from unfair punishments, and advocated against unnecessary killings. But at the same time, he was also feared for his erratic behaviour and mood swings, and those who became his wives reported physical violence and sexual abuse. Both sides – being both feared and admired, and yet not fully understood – confirmed Kony’s God-like status.

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<sup>94</sup>For further reference, see Allen (1991), Behrend (1999), p’Bitek (1971), Victor and Porter (2017).

### **Squandering legitimacy: The effects of indiscriminate violence and lack of strategic action**

Against the large number of former combatants who attributed some legitimacy to the LRA's fight, some interviewees categorically denied the LRA legitimacy. They said they do not understand its reasons at all and, therefore, cannot speak about their justness. This was mostly true for women, who were often excluded from strategic discussions and lectures, as were low-ranking combatants and new abductees.<sup>95</sup> Others questioned the LRA's legitimacy mainly on two grounds: (1) violence perpetrated against civilians and colleagues alike, and (2) a perceived mismatch between the LRA's actions and their stated goals. In many cases, these two motives were closely intertwined. Most importantly, it was violence against civilians which called the LRA's credibility into question:

The reason for these people's fighting is what I have failed to understand. [...] Kony has been in the bush for so many years; shouldn't he have overthrown the government by now? There could have been some changes in the twenty years. [...] But there is nothing apart from brutality that he is undertaking. (Joan, ll. 1177–1190)

They talk like that [as if they were fighting for a good cause], but in my opinion we are exhausting ourselves for no good reason. Because these people they don't go to attack government bases, instead they attack civilians all the time. So to me, this fight has no meaning. (Isaac, ll. 370–375)

Like many of their colleagues, Joan and Isaac did not question the insurgency as such, but took offence at the means applied, especially the excessive use of violence against civilians. By addressing the LRA as "they" (*gin*) and "these people" (*joni*), Joan and Isaac narratively distanced themselves from "their" actions. Not only did these actions cause suffering on a large scale, but, as they argued, they didn't seem to bring the LRA closer to its proclaimed goal of overthrowing the acting government. In fact, many interviewees felt it achieved quite the opposite, while it violated and estranged civilians:

It [the LRA's fight] would be justified but they have concentrated on torturing the civilians. The LRA does have all the fighting equipment

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<sup>95</sup>Though claims to be excluded from this information might have also been a defensive strategy to abdicate responsibility, at least in some cases.

and if they would befriend the civilians, they would even succeed to overthrow the government. They say they are fighting to overthrow the government because it is bad. But if they would be friendly to the civilians, I think they would even get good support from them. (James, ll. 339–349)

By targeting the very people they claim to represent and whose patronage they need, the LRA has not only lost vital assistance and general support from the civilian population. It has also lost or failed to generate approval for its actions in its own ranks. James's narrative also shows how the choice of means and military success were linked. Both in Joan's and James's narrative, the rejection of violence against civilians is closely connected to the group's military performance. In fact, their military performance was in and of itself a criterion for assessing the group's legitimacy:

They told us that they were fighting to overthrow the government, that was their primary goal. But to me I think the fighting was useless because if they were fighting to overthrow the government, they would have captured it by now. [...] Well I think that fighting was just a waste of time. (Fred, ll. 353–365)

Fred's account shows how the assessment of the LRA's legitimacy depended on its performance, i.e. its progress towards disempowering Museveni's government. For him and others, the failure to make any substantial strides towards this goal clearly questioned the LRA's commitment to it, and, thereby, their position to address the political interests of the Acholi. On the other hand, it was internal power struggles and severe punishments of colleagues that caused many combatants to question the proportionality and effectiveness of the LRA's strategy. Among these, the assassinations of Otti Lagony in 1999 and of Otti Vincent in 2007 made lasting impressions on many former combatants. Both high-ranking commanders fell from grace over rumours of disloyalty and intentions to defect. Though it is not known for sure, it seems that Otti Lagony was about to demobilise, and that he would have taken a large number of combatants loyal to him with him (Cakaj 2016: 64). He was replaced by Otti Vincent, a well-respected and popular commander whose assassination unsettled and frustrated many combatants: "We were sad. We were angry but we stomached it since we couldn't do anything" (Faith, ll. 1477–1478). In both cases, it seems that the assassinations were rather strategic moves to take out a commander who had become influential enough to pose a real threat to Kony's grip on power (Cakaj 2016:

157–158). While former combatants couldn't always tell rumours from facts, and were unsure what motivated demotions and lethal punishments, they felt that these internal fights were a distraction from the political goals the LRA claimed to fight for. Moreover, they were disheartened by the killing of close colleagues, friends, and spouses.

It is not coincidental that violence crucially affects perceptions of legitimacy. The use of violence is probably the most pressing issue any non-state armed group has to address. Their claim to power vitally depends on the use of force and physical violence, and part of their legitimacy stems from their capacity to subjugate others to their will (Popitz 1992, von Trotha 1994b). At the same time, there is always need to legitimise violence, in particular its most expressive forms. This is even more true when it affects those who should benefit – instead of suffering – from the organisation's actions. Klaus Schlichte (2009) has called this dynamic the 'shadow of violence': armed groups depend on the use of violence and its credible threat, but the same violence they use to get into a position of power also has the potential to delegitimise them and their actions. Apparently, this dynamic also affected the LRA's power base.

What is telling about these arguments is that former combatants only rarely questioned the legitimacy of going into the bush to fight the incumbent government as such. Instead, their refusal was about the choice of means (especially violence and abduction), and their questionable relationship with the organisation's political goals. That is, former combatants questioned the LRA on grounds of their chosen means, but hardly ever questioned its right to fight. Given the fact that almost all of them were forcibly recruited, this is somewhat surprising: Most combatants do not categorically deny the LRA legitimacy based on their own abduction. It seems that, in some way, their violation as Acholi is more substantial than their individual violation as persons. The underlying legitimacy beliefs are, as I would argue, important variables in understanding the combatants' commitment. While legitimacy beliefs don't put combatants in a state of enthusiastic approval, they do create at least some indecisiveness about their fight, which allows for their identification with the organisation.

## Summary

In this chapter, I have argued that the immersion of combatants in the LRA happens not just on a practical and emotional level, but has an ideological dimension

as well. That is, combatants ascribe some legitimacy to the LRA's fight. These legitimacy beliefs are crucial to understanding their conflicted relationship with the LRA. I identified three sources of legitimacy beliefs: political, spiritual, and performance-based. These sources of legitimacy are confronted with the delegitimising effects of adverse action; in particular, violence against civilians and colleagues, and the perception of a lack of commitment to the organisation's proclaimed goals of overthrowing the incumbent government and improving the livelihoods of people in the North. Spirit beliefs played a particular role in this, since they not only provided reason to believe in the movement in and of itself, but helped to make sense of the LRA's actions and reasons more generally. As such, they are not expressions of the LRA's irrationality, but of their and the combatants' need to understand and access their life-worlds.

However, these legitimacy beliefs have to be seen not only in the light of the interviewees' past as combatants, but also against the backdrop of their presence as returnees. They allow only limited access to people's past understandings of their engagement as combatants, but rather provide insights into their appropriation and negotiation of this past through their narratives. As such, they are part of a sense-making project in which former combatants aim to reconcile their past and their present selves, a challenge that is central to their process of returning home and becoming 'like people at home' again.

## **4.7 Looking back and looking forward: Returning to civilian life**

### **Abstract**

In the preceding chapters, I have detailed how combatants became part of the LRA, and how they learned to cope with their violent everyday life. Their adaptation and the organisation's facilitation thereof allowed them to lead their lives 'as if': as if their lives were normal, like at home; and as if violence weren't an equally decisive and disruptive part of it. Still, most combatants try to escape this reality at some point – in most cases, deliberately. How do they make this decision, and how do they manage to follow through with it? How do they look back at their experiences in the bush, and how do they see and evaluate their lives upon return? How do people understand the impact war had and has on their lives? How do these perceptions affect their present and future? What do their experiences and evaluations tell us about the chances and challenges of the demobilisation and reintegration of former and active combatants? In this chapter, I will look at the larger decision- and sense-making processes involved in return from bush life, and how their experiences as combatants become part of their stories and identity claims.

### **Going home: Decisions and actions in returning to civilian life**

In this thesis, I have argued that both the combatants as individuals and the LRA as an organisation command a number of resources to make life in the bush habitable; sometimes so much so that it becomes 'like home'. Still, at some point, most combatants leave this life behind, either deliberately (through escape or surrender) or by accident (through capture, rescue, or release). How do combatants return from the bush? What resources do they have and use to organise for their return?

First off, a considerable number of abductees never return from captivity – either because they are still part of the group (a minority), or because they die in battle, from hunger or malnourishment, diseases, or complications in pregnancy and childbirth, or they are killed by the LRA. Annan et al. (2008: 33) estimate that approximately 20 percent of the male and 5 percent of the female abductees never returned from captivity. For those who managed to leave the bush, return from captivity happened in one of three ways: combatants were either captured,



rescued, or surrendered (during battle or in encounters with the UPDF or other armed forces;<sup>96</sup> they were released (by a superior or the LRA's high command); or they managed to escape. Among the 43 returnees included in the sample, 8 (4 male, 4 female) were captured, rescued, or surrendered; 6 (all female) were released; and 29 (9 female, 20 male) escaped (see Table 1). Except for the relatively high number of released wives, these numbers are close to the proportions given in larger and more representative samples.<sup>97</sup> Thus, the overwhelming majority of combatants returned on their own initiative, through escape; the other modes of return never accounted for more than a third of returnees. How, and when, do combatants decide to escape? The interviewees' narratives show that, in many cases, escape was motivated or made possible by a window of opportunity. For the most part, combatants reported how they escaped in battlefield situations, at night, or when sent to fetch water, loot, or go to the gardens.<sup>98</sup> Some of them escaped with colleagues or family members, while others escaped on their own (see Table 1).

For those who had stayed with the LRA for a long time, opportunities to escape presented themselves on various occasions. Many combatants admitted that they were left unsupervised and could have escaped before they eventually did. That means that escape is not just about (objective) opportunities. Rather, the question is when opportunities are perceived as such, and when they are actively sought out by the combatants themselves. For instance, fear often worked as an effective deterrent against escape even in the absence of tangible means to prevent combatants' escape. Combatants were not only afraid of the repercussions (frequently, death) in case they got caught. Moreover, they suspected that the high command would get to know about their intent to escape beforehand, either because of Kony's assumed spiritual powers or because they were tipped off by a colleague. Additionally, the way home was perceived as fraught with dangers,

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<sup>96</sup>Terminology – whether somebody was rescued, captured, or surrendered from the battlefield – is not consistent in the literature; in any of these cases, combatants are freed from the organisation's grip by a third party. What differentiates captured from rescued and surrendered combatants is their mindset, which is typically hard to assess. In the literature and datasets, these cases are commonly treated as one, and I will do the same.

<sup>97</sup>Of the forced wives who returned in the sample of Annan et al. (2008: 44), 83 percent escaped, 7 percent were released, and 10 percent were rescued or captured. Among all females who stayed in captivity for more than two weeks, 68 percent escaped, while 27 percent were released and 5 percent were captured or rescued. For the sample of male combatants, approximately 81 percent returned through escape, while 15 percent were released and 5 percent were rescued or captured (Annan et al. 2006: 62).

<sup>98</sup>In the sample of male combatants from Annan et al. (2006: 62), each of these three modes of return (during battle, at night, on duty) accounts for approximately one-third of the returnees.

especially from Sudan: “The Dinkas wanted to kill us, the Lutugus wanted to kill us, the lions and leopards also wanted to feast on us” (John, ll. 1250–1253). As the interviewees argued, other armed groups and armies, armed civilians, wild animals, lacking orientation and means to communicate, and not least malnutrition and diseases posed severe threats to their lives upon escape. Women also faced the risk of being captured by civilians and forced into relationships from there.<sup>99</sup> Outside of Uganda, combatants were often less closely monitored because they were not expected to escape:<sup>100</sup> The environment, at least in combatants’ imagination, was hostile enough to keep them in captivity even in the absence of continuous supervision and the credible threat of violent sanctions. This shows that perceptions of risk of return are closely linked to perceptions of risk associated with escape. Combatants’ decision to stay or leave was informed by their ideas and knowledge concerning their chances of escaping successfully and making it home safely, and about their reception by civilian communities, armed forces, and their home communities.

When we asked combatants what motivated their return, their answers were in most cases not about the sheer possibility of escaping, or the odds of escaping successfully. Rather, their narratives showed how such opportunities were actively sought at some point because circumstances changed in a way that convinced combatants to take the risk:

When I was in Sudan I also had that thought [of escaping] but the problem was the long distance. But when my husband died in 1997, I started having hard and tough times; we used to work like slaves. [...] We would dig using our hands because if we hadn’t done it that way, what would the children have eaten? [...] At times we would go dig with them [our escorts] and have high yields. But when we started having tough and rough times, I decided to escape together with the girl we were abducted with on the same day. (Janet, ll. 1134–1160)

While in Uganda, we lived in a place in Teso [sub-region]. Eeh! That place was fire. It was the worst. It was at that place that I made a final decision that whether they want to kill me or not, they can decide. I will escape. (Faith, ll. 603–608)

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<sup>99</sup>Unfortunately, I cannot make a statement on the magnitude of this phenomenon; however, such cases have been described by some of the interviewees and Victor and Porter (2017).

<sup>100</sup>In contrast, one high-ranking interviewee (who was not part of the core sample) described this as an incentive to escape: Since Kony wouldn’t be able to follow him back to Uganda, threats to retaliate against him and his family were now empty.

Life became so difficult, because fighting was intense. I had two children already. And the kind of beating I received there made me feel so bad. I told myself that even though I am going to die some place, let me die, but I don't want to be killed by them. The beating I received was because of this man [who was taking care of me while my husband was away] who escaped, and I thought of leaving that place as well. (Prisca, ll. 687–696)

Combatants often decided to escape when life became hard to a point where they felt they could not take it any longer. In the above statements, the decision to escape isn't narrated as a turning point, but rather, as a point of no return that forced the interviewee to make a decision. Common motives were intense fights, severe hunger and malnourishment, loss of physical and emotional support (for instance, when the husband died), and loss of hope for their living situation to improve, or fading confidence that the political fight of the LRA would eventually succeed. The decision to escape was often reached in a situation where they felt they had nothing left to lose, and that there was a good chance of dying both in captivity or while trying to escape. Aware that death was a real option, they decided to try their luck and to rather die 'from home' than in the bush.<sup>101</sup> Some interviewees also described having escaped rather spontaneously, when they found themselves in a situation where they realised that there was nothing holding them back – for instance, when they separated from the larger group during a fight, or were sent away to relay a message to the commander of another unit. In most cases, though, escape was initiated by a decision that preceded the opportunity to realise it rather the other way around.

In sum, motives for escape were mostly “a mixture of opportunity and willingness” (Annan et al. 2006: 62). Though only a small number of combatants and none of my core sample of interviewees had made an active decision to join the LRA, the involuntary nature of their engagement didn't mean that they constantly thought about ways to escape. Combatants often ‘forgot’ about escape as they became immersed in the LRA. In this situation, the intention to escape had to *become a decision again* before they tried to do so. Such decisions and actions towards escape were motivated by a combination of opportunities, boldness, a positive assessment of the involved risks and possible gains, and support

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<sup>101</sup>This statement also shows how bush becomes ‘like home’ (see Chapter 4.2 starting on page 90), but does not replace the idea of home as a distinct place.

and momentum from peers.

Returning home itself was often a journey that took several weeks or even months, especially for those who escaped from Sudan, Congo or CAR. Almost all interviewees reported being welcomed by civilians and armed forces alike,<sup>102</sup> quite in contrast to what they had been told in captivity: “[M]any times they [the LRA leadership] told and deceived us that they [the UPDF] killed rebels instead of rescuing them. They deceived us saying that the UPDF slaughtered the rebels from top to bottom” (Joan, ll. 1249–1254). Joan told this story giggling, but emphasised how she back then had believed it to be true. As combatants didn’t have much access to alternative sources of information except from occasional radio transmissions, for many, their overall fair treatment upon return came as a surprise.

Subsequently, many returnees and most of my interviewees stayed for some time in one or more reception centres.<sup>103</sup> As the resources that were available to the centres differed vastly over time, so did the support that they offered. It included the documentation of returnees, medical check-ups, psychological counselling, vocational training, finding and reuniting returnees with their families, and often a follow-up on their reintegration progress (Allen and Schomerus 2006: 40–41).

### Challenges of reintegration and post-conflict society

For most interviewees, returning to civilian life itself was not seen as the hardest part. The process of settling back into their communities came with a number of practical, existential and emotional challenges. From the interviews, I identified four main challenges: (1) the stigma of being a returnee, (2) perceptions of legal

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<sup>102</sup>However, among the respondents in the SWAY sample, one-tenth of the male and one-eighth of the female returnees that were received by the UPDF reported being harmed in some way (prolonged interrogation, harsh questioning, or beatings) (Annan et al. 2006: 65–66, Annan et al. 2008: 36–37).

<sup>103</sup>There is some selection bias in this sample, since 14 out of 43 interviewees have been contacted through one of the reception centres (see Table 1). From their (more representative) sample, Annan et al. (2006: 64) suggest that among those males who were abducted for more than two weeks, two-thirds went through some kind of formal reception process with the UPDF, and half of the male returnees passed through a reception centre. Among the females, rates were comparatively higher (which is also an effect of average abduction length); over 50 percent of forced wives and 70 percent of those who had given birth to children in captivity spent at least some time in a reception centre (Annan et al. 2008: 44).

insecurity, (3) missed opportunities and education, and (4) a lack of resources, in particular, access to land and means to take care of their children.

*The stigma of being a returnee.* Much of the literature on the LRA, especially the numerous reports written for and by the advocacy sector, emphasises the stigmatisation of former combatants in their communities. These reports show how some returnees have been rejected and approached with fear by their families and community members (see for instance Eichstaedt 2009, Ladisch 2015). While this has been a more pronounced issue in the past, only a few interviewees recounted being outright rejected or ostracised by members of their communities.<sup>104</sup> However, a considerable number of them described how they were confronted with more latent forms of stigma or prejudice. Faith pondered her experience:

I always tell people (...) they always say people who returned from captivity are bigheaded, thieves, they are countless wrongdoers etc. If you were abducted when you were a thief in your mother's home, then you are a thief forever. If you were abducted when you were bigheaded or rude, then you are rude up to now. Do you see! [...] If I don't start talking about my experiences in the war, no one would even know. Because I am free and social to the people around me. If I am to fuss, I fuss according to the magnitude of the offence or what brought that issue up. I don't have words like: "Do you know who I am? Don't joke around". (Faith, ll. 1723–1741)

Although Faith feels she is no different from her age-mates and other members of the community, and that people's character shows in their actions and not in their experience of abduction, she fights against prejudices that say otherwise.<sup>105</sup> The interviewees often felt that they had to weight their actions and responses more carefully than others to avoid being identified with some kind of "mentality of the bush" (*kit me lumi*) (Simon, ll. 382–383). Oloya (2013: 77) has argued that precisely because combatants hold on to their identities prior to abduction, they suffer through great pain when being identified as 'bush people' (*olum*) and not as civilians upon their return. They feel that they had, and continue to have, to prove their essential goodness and detachment from bush life and its subcultural codes not only to themselves, but also to the members of their family and community, often while coping with trauma and difficulties in adjusting.

<sup>104</sup>This observation has also been confirmed by Annan et al. (2006: 66).

<sup>105</sup>It is probably no coincidence that she was one of the few interviewees who explicitly asked to be interviewed away from home.

*Perceptions of legal insecurity.* But community judgement wasn't the only one the interviewees worried about. Some of them were also concerned about potential legal repercussions. While the Amnesty Act is still in place, granting immunity from prosecution in Uganda to all Ugandan citizens,<sup>106</sup> they reported not feeling safe from any future charges. Since many interviews were conducted at the time of the pretrial hearings in the ICC's case against Dominic Ongwen, they felt that their concerns were more justified than ever. The ongoing trials of him and Thomas Kwoyelo, and the outstanding ICC warrants for Joseph Kony and Otti Vincent, created a sense of legal insecurity among them.<sup>107</sup> Most interviewees shared strong opinions on the legitimacy of the trial of Dominic Ongwen:

The trial of Ongwen is hurting me; I feel like I am in his shoes. If his [case] is done, I might follow [him] because we were all in captivity. I am predicting something like that to happen, because I was in the same bush with Ongwen. So, do you think if Ongwen went down the [same] rough road I went down, don't you think I will one day follow him? I guess my time will come soon. (Jackson, ll. 1096–1106)

More than anything, Jackson's statement shows how closely connected legal and moral judgement were for many combatants. My interviewees could hardly talk about Ongwen's case without addressing their own position as returnees. If there was any charge that could be confirmed for him, they reasoned, the same would apply to them. This statement also shows how combatants did not necessarily identify with the LRA, but shared a strong sense of connectedness with their colleagues.

*Missed opportunities and education.* Missed education and training was by far the most common and prominent concern stated by the interviewees. They were painfully aware that they couldn't compete with those who were spared from abduction and had completed their education as planned. These challenges are not unique to former combatants; in fact, disrupted education and unem-

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<sup>106</sup>Though the Amnesty Act only applies to Ugandan nationals, and is in conflict with international law (namely, prosecution by the ICC) (Hovil and Lomo 2005), there is – except for Thomas Kwoyelo – no known case against anyone except for those high-ranking commanders listed by the ICC.

<sup>107</sup>The warrants of arrest for Raska Lukwiya and Okot Odhiambo have been terminated due to the passing of the suspects. Otti Vincent is assumed to have been assassinated by Kony in 2007 in the course of disagreements over the Juba Peace Talks, but his death hasn't been confirmed by the ICC yet (International Criminal Court 2007, 2015, 2016b, Maliti 2017).

ployment, in particular among the youth, affects large parts of Uganda's rural and urban population.<sup>108</sup> Only a few people manage to take full advantage of educational opportunities. Even basic education is prohibitively expensive, and most parents simply cannot afford to send (all of) their children to school.<sup>109</sup> In addition, many children will drop out early or attend intermittently, mostly due to a lack of financial means or other obligations, such as helping out at home, taking care of siblings and elderly family members, or as a consequence of becoming parents themselves. The disruption of traditional ways of living through widespread encampment has aggravated this situation for the civilian population as well (Dolan 2005). However, schooling rates are even lower for those whose education was disrupted by their abduction, and who have as young adults an even harder time acquiring the necessary resources to continue it (Annan et al. 2006: 30–32). While a good number of the returnees profited from some kind of vocational training sponsored mostly by NGOs and reception centres, only a few of these trainings resulted in lasting employment.<sup>110</sup> The simultaneous lack of personal resources and employment opportunities puts former combatants at a comparative disadvantage in an already strained job market: “there is no way I can even get a job because every time you are looking for a job they ask for academic papers, and I don't have any” (Deo, ll. 594–598). This situation is only partly relieved by programs specifically targeted at them.<sup>111</sup>

*Lack of resources.* The lack of resources, in particular to earn money to acquire cash-bound commodities, puts pressure not only on people's current lives, but also on their future. Today, access to and ownership of land is one of the most pressing issues for former combatants and the majority of civilians who lived in the camps (see for instance Hopwood and Atkinson 2015, Lenhart 2013, Stewart 2017: 158–159). This is particularly true for women, whose ‘bush marriages’ didn't result in them being ‘married to a home’. In most cases, forced wives refuse to live with their husbands from captivity, and both they and their children are often rejected

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<sup>108</sup>Estimates suggest that between 62 and 83 percent of the unemployed population are below 26 years of age (Action Aid International Uganda (AAU) et al. 2012: 37; Soucat et al. 2013: 3), while young people between the ages of 15 and 29 make up 28 percent of the overall population (Uganda Bureau of Statistics 2016: 14).

<sup>109</sup>Although in 1997 Uganda launched a Universal Primary Education (UPE) scheme that prohibits public primary and secondary schools from collecting mandatory fees, most schools ask for fees paid in cash or kind to cover the difference between public funding and monetary needs of the schools. Moreover, parents and guardians are expected to cover things like school uniforms, pens and paper, and meals (Mwesigwa 2015, Sakaue 2018).

<sup>110</sup>Annan et al. (2006: 33–34) have made some suggestions why that might be the case.

<sup>111</sup>Whose existence, in turn, creates problems of its own; see Annan et al. (2006: 79–83).

by the husband's family. Since these women are not considered to be properly married, they do not have access to land, which in turn means that their sons have no means of building a family themselves. Joan described this conflict:

I come from J [a place in Nwoya district], the people there didn't want me [to stay] [...]. They told me that I came back with children from the bush that will later start fighting for land here, so it won't be possible [for us to stay]. [...] It's all because of land. I came back with boys so this tension is very intense.<sup>112</sup> They got a *panga* to kill me. I also got a hoe and said whoever kills the other is mightier and takes control of the land. I accepted to die and follow my mother, because even my mother's cradle land was given to the people living there [who settled there since she died]. They don't accept us to stay there [either]. (Joan, ll. 1359–1380)

Joan's account shows how she is affected by land conflict both as a returnee and as the child of a civilian. Her paternal uncle's family doesn't want her around, fearing that her sons will make claims to the land they own. At the same time, she cannot return to her deceased mother's land, since other people have settled there in the meantime. Like many returnees, she is forced to rent a place. The lack of land to live on and to cultivate puts a lot of pressure on those who already have precariously low and unreliable incomes. Apart from difficulties in paying rent, almost all of them recounted that they struggle to take care of the future and education of their children – in particular, to pay school fees. In fact, the payment of school fees was the most pressing issue for male and female interviewees alike. Education was seen as the key to access a better future, if not for themselves, then at least for their children: “If I am healthy I can work hard to pay for my children to attend school so that they have a bright future. I didn't study, so they should become my light in the dark” (Samuel, ll. 1667–1671). Education is also understood as one of the most important reasons why they themselves feel they cannot work up from their precarious position, as I will show below.

### Return narratives between strength and vulnerability

For most combatants, returning home is not an easy feat, either on a physical and practical or on a mental and emotional level. Not only do returnees have to find

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<sup>112</sup>For parents, boys are more of a financial burden. Since their future wives marry into the husband's family, they are expected to pay *luk* (a kind of bridewealth) to the wife's family.



a place in their communities and ways to make a living. They also have to make sense of their experiences in captivity as these become not only part of their life in the bush, but of their overall life stories. These narratives of returning home are both standardised – adaptations of the discursive offers made by a large array of religious, political, and humanitarian actors – and creative, displays of former combatants’ own sense-making.

How do people understand themselves and manage to reclaim their lives in the aftermath of leading violent lives? Lois Presser (2008) has tried to answer this question in her study of the stories of male offenders – convicted of rape, murder, or assault – in and out of correctional facilities in the United States. In her analysis of their stories, she identifies three types of narratives: (1) *reform narratives*, (2) *stability narratives*, and (3) *elastic narratives*. As blueprints, these standardised narratives try to provide answers to the question how the offenders’ deviant actions relate to their identities. *Reform narratives* make a point of the offenders’ not only changed behaviour, but character. Through such narratives, offenders make claims to a new and morally bettered self. In contrast, *stability narratives* are about conveying a stable and unchanged moral self. Their narrative effort is not about resurrecting a moral self fallen from grace because, as they argue, they have been good all along, either because they have been adhering to subcultural codes, or because they were (mostly) decent despite navigating an immoral place (or both). Where offenders resort to both elements of reform and stability narratives within their stories, using them as they see fit, they are making use of *elastic narratives*.

Of course, the way forced combatants approach and build their narratives is different from violent offenders in the United States. Most notably, the latter were typically not formally forced into their violent career, but took active steps towards delinquency (even if they will try to erase their personal agency from this process). What is similar, though, is that both groups know about the societal judgement of their actions, not least because they have felt their repercussions. They are challenged to make sense of their experiences of leading violent lives as they serve their sentences and return to their former lives. That is, they have to make these episodes of life outside of conventional society part of their life stories. To do that, they can and will resort to a set of narratives that the social context offers them to make sense of their experiences (Sandberg 2010: 458). These narratives are both creative and standardised. Through the use of ‘formula stories’ (Brookman et al. 2011, Loseke 2007), former combatants can situate their own

experiences and identity within established and accepted subcultural narratives. These self-stories serve different narrative goals – for instance, to fend off a discussion or a level of intimacy interviewees don't want to have, or to convey a desired identity both to themselves and the interviewer. I identify three distinct return narratives former combatants repeatedly made use of: *rabbit hole narratives*, *narratives of strength through suffering*, and *survivor narratives*. These narratives are not mutually exclusive; interviewees may use elements of different narratives simultaneously. They are situated (and, by extension, situate their narrators) between two poles: namely, *strength* and *vulnerability*.

*"I am just like a child": rabbit hole narratives.* Rabbit hole narratives, as I would like to call them, are a variation on the tale of *Alice in Wonderland*. In the tale, the young protagonist Alice spends an uneventful day, when suddenly she finds herself in a new world down the rabbit hole. For Alice, this world with its own rules and logic is as exciting as it is challenging, forcing her to learn and adjust to new realities at a moment's notice. Her engagement with this world ends as Alice is woken up from what appears to have been a dream, and returns to her old life. Rabbit hole narratives follow the same storyline, in which fate strikes and breaks with the routine(s) of everyday life, and forces its protagonists to quickly adjust to a life they didn't choose on their own. And just like Alice, they return to their old life without mediation between the two worlds. But unlike Alice, their time down the rabbit hole is not just an adventure story; it leaves them bruised. That is, they disappeared from the face of the earth in their youth and were spit out into it again as adults and parents, with the only difference that they are now less well equipped compared to their contemporaries:

Before I was taken into captivity, I was in school and I really wanted to study so that I would be able to get a job, support my family, and also the community. That is what I wanted to be before I was taken in captivity, so right now that I am back from captivity, I am just like a child. This is because my time has been wasted; in this world you need to have some academic knowledge and that made me not to be even close to a chance of getting formal employment, because I don't have what it takes to be employed. (Joel, ll. 726–739)

Joel talked about the hopes and plans he had for his future before he was abducted. For him, the time spent in the bush disrupted his training route for good and, thereby, his chance of finding gainful employment today. The disruption of education and its lasting impact on the interviewees' chances in

the job market was a common motif in their narratives of return to civilian life. Not only do they find themselves – like most of their age-mates – in a state of ‘waithood’ (Honwana 2008b, 2012), but they feel that they are last in line when opportunities for employment and upward mobility open up. Women in particular expressed sadness and anger about the missed opportunities for getting a proper education (see also Porter 2015: 84), thereby missing out on other opportunities as well. By becoming forced wives, women were also forced into early motherhood, which in turn prevented them from taking up educational opportunities and from finding a ‘good’ (that is, respectful and educated) husband upon their return:

I will not be happy for a long time, since I didn’t study and can’t qualify for any job. And there is no educated man who would marry me, because I didn’t study. Maybe if I was educated someone would have married me *cash*<sup>113</sup>. [...] Maybe if I had gone to school I would secure a good job and get a good man. (Patience, ll. 812–822)

Patience’s narrative is characterised by the presence of ‘what might have been’ but seems impossible given her history of abduction: getting a proper education, securing a good job, marrying a decent husband, and, ultimately, finding happiness. Rabbit hole narratives leave their protagonists incapacitated, unable to undo the damage; but they allow them to make claims to an unchanged, still innocent self. By understanding their time in the bush as ‘lost time’ without any personal development, combatants can make claims to a self that is stable over time and unimpressed by the experiences they had in captivity. In this sense, their stories contain elements of both stability and vulnerability narratives. They allow combatants to posit themselves as decent human beings while, and through, understanding themselves as innocent victims. Here, their ‘victimcy’ (Utas 2003, 2005) is not (primarily) a means to ask for assistance, but to make and uphold identity claims. In their narratives, there is no place for personal agency and acts of decision-making, either in captivity or upon their return to civilian life. Rabbit hole narratives allow former combatants to make use of “discourses of abdicated responsibility” (Shepler 2005: 25), in which they become unaccountable not only for their actions in the bush, but also for their lives upon return.

*Narratives of strength through suffering.* Narratives of strength through suffering, as I would like to call them, have to be understood against the backdrop

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<sup>113</sup>Meaning in accordance with the Acholi tradition of paying *luk* to her family.

of the place religion has in people's lives. Most Acholi are devout Christians, and both spirit and religious beliefs are crucial aspects of how people understand and approach their lives.<sup>114</sup> Decisions are routinely made in accordance with expectations of being a good Christian, and whatever happens is understood as a result of God's work. Interviewees who adopted a strength-through-suffering narrative saw their experience of abduction not as a meaningless coincidence, but as part of a divine plan. While they didn't understand its purpose, they found consolation in the belief that their suffering wasn't pointless; that there is a reason for the course their life has taken. Faith explains:

[T]he colleagues I studied and grew up with nowadays are grown up, have good jobs and are educated. Meanwhile I didn't attend school as expected. At times when I think about it, I get sad but I know it was God's plan. (Faith, ll. 1640–1645)

While Faith's story picks up on elements of a rabbit hole narrative – recounting how she missed out on educational opportunities that would put her in a better position today – her evaluation of the course her life has taken is a different one, one that is shared by many of her compatriots. Seeing their fate of abduction and their eventual return from captivity as part of a divine plan allowed former combatants to absolve themselves from any agency in it, and freed them to a certain degree to think about what might have been. Their experiences were without alternative; it was always in their cards. As such, they are rather a source of strength than of vulnerability. By taking such a perspective, the interviewees feel challenged to make the most of it instead of feeling sorry for themselves. While they have a similar evaluation of the impact their abduction had and has on their lives as former combatants who commit to a rabbit hole narrative, they come up with a different conclusion. Without doubt, their fate of abduction has made their lives today tougher; still, they argue that they cannot but push through, not least because it is the challenge they understand God has chosen for them.

*Survivor narratives.* Survivor narratives start with terminology; that is, with someone refusing to be called and addressed as a victim. Using a survivor narrative includes admitting to, and thereby claiming, one's suffering. As such, it

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<sup>114</sup>For some, their religious beliefs or orientations are a consequence of their abduction experience; see Victor (2011: 97).

has become a powerful discourse in the broader context of speaking up about experiences of sexual violence (see for instance Dunn 2005). By employing a survivor narrative, former combatants vow to not let themselves and their future be defined by the experiences they had in the LRA. While they understand their abduction as a violation, they see their survival as an obligation to try and strive for a better future, to speak up for others in the same situation, and to be a spokesperson for everyone who has been violated in the same way. In this context, some interviewees also talked about ways to address their victimisation, for instance, through the payment of reparations:

There was a time we came up with a resolution that, since there was a war in Sudan some time back and they were paid [compensated], it should also be imitated in Uganda so that (...) I know this kind of payments will cool our hearts but it will not remove the scars on our bodies. But it will console and pacify the mind. (Faith, ll. 1084–1094)

In Faith's narrative, their victimisation becomes a starting point to request not assistance, but compensation, both as an acknowledgement of their violation and as a means of social repair. Survivor narratives like this are inherently political; they are about empowerment and agency, but about the agency of a survivor instead of that of a victim or a perpetrator. Typically, but not always, they were voiced by interviewees who were involved in some kind of advocacy activity.<sup>115</sup> Survivor narratives are narratives of strength that break with the passivity and subjection of the victim position. They allow former combatants to tell their stories of victimisation without disempowering their narrators.

The rejection and adaptation of these narratives is one of the most vital displays of the research participants' agency. By using them, they pursue a number of different narrative goals. They use them to make identity claims, but also to recover their lives. By employing a survivor narrative, for instance, former combatants do not only reclaim agency over their lives, but refuse to be addressed (and to address themselves) as perpetrators. Strength-through-suffering narratives are an attempt to undo the arbitrary nature of abduction. By linking their abduction to their religious beliefs, it becomes part of a divine plan, both proof of God's care for them and a challenge to be mastered and learned from. Rabbit hole narratives, in contrast, help former combatants to remove themselves from

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<sup>115</sup>This connection is, I would argue, not coincidental, but shows how narratives pick up on different sources and discourses.

any agency in their fate, thereby allowing them to make claims to an unchanged and innocent self.

Narratives of strength don't differ from narratives of vulnerability with regards to the storyteller's agency. In fact, there is as much agency in understanding and presenting oneself as a victim as there is in refusing to be called one. There is a big difference, however, in how former combatants see and approach their future. Those who adopt a narrative of strength see their time spent in captivity as something that is in the past:

I have hopes that my future will be bright because if something bad happens to you once in your life, you cannot be the same person suffering all the time. (Scovia, ll. 1382–1385)

The advice I always give to my colleagues is for them to live at ease, since these things have happened. Probably it happened for a reason either bad or good. If it was for the bad, it's past now, and it can't be removed. They should start looking at life from a new perspective. [...] Just forget about all that happened. (Faith, ll. 1710–1745)

Among the things that happened in the past, I look back at my education and I wish I was educated. My education ended. Secondly, I always think about my parents because they had the ability to give me advice. They have all passed away. If one of them was alive, they would have given me advice. My children would stay with them as I continue with my work. [...] This makes me remember so many things that made my life really difficult. This does not stop me from progressing with life though. (Herbert, ll. 1859–1874)

While these narratives show that they are aware of their abduction's lasting impact on their lives, they feel free and committed to move on, and to make the best of the opportunities that present themselves today. Interviewees that adopt a narrative of vulnerability are unable to do so. Their present is determined by the time lost and the things that happened in captivity. They feel powerless to move beyond it:<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup>Such a state of powerlessness may also result from or be accompanied by psychological trauma. While there is an ongoing debate whether clinical diagnoses like posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and their therapeutic interventions can be applied to such cases (see Argenti-Pillen 2003, Jensen and Shaw 1993, Scheper-Hughes 2008), some studies (see Okello et al. 2007, Pfeiffer and Elbert 2011, Wilker et al. 2016) suggest that former combatants often show a number of behavioural and neurological syndromes associated with pathological stress and

The time they abducted me I was under the sponsorship of [a Christian NGO], so if I were at home I would have continued with my studies. And maybe I would be working right now. I see some of my friends with whom I was studying, they finished their studies and some of them have decent jobs, homes and they are driving their own cars now. So most of the time I look at myself I feel sad. (Joyce, ll. 826–836)

With the challenges they face and their perception of being powerless to change anything about it, some of them even expressed regret that they have returned from the bush:

Sometimes this thought comes to my mind and I feel like I should have stayed in the bush; I would rather die there. [By the time I returned,] My mother wasn't there anymore [was already dead], my father wasn't there anymore, my father's brothers were there (...) [A]t times when fighting broke out I could have been dead. It looks tiring. Life at home is very difficult. (Joan, ll. 1300–1308)

From Joan's narrative, it becomes clear that she does not only struggle to look forward; her inability to move beyond her past traps her in it, and makes her question her decision to have returned from the bush at all. Though most former combatants prefer their lives today over those they led in captivity, their reintegration remains challenging:

[A]s a matter of fact life in the bush was hard. People suffered, but that was God's plan. Where we are headed, life is getting worse. We former abductees always contemplate of whether there is something good or bad coming ahead. It's a whole mix. That's what we think. (Andrew, ll. 1401–1408)

Even though life as a civilian spares people from war-related violence, from "hear[ing] the sounds of the gun" (Scovia, ll. 1329–1330), from fearing for their lives all the time, their assessment is still ambiguous; often, it's "fifty-fifty", as Andrew (ll. 1415) says. With the struggles former combatants face upon their return, many find it hard to value their lives today over their time spent in the bush. While programs of demobilisation and reintegration have proved to be largely successful in reintegrating returnees in their home communities and pro-

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trauma.

viding them with psychosocial support, many still lack the material and emotional resources to move beyond war.

### Summary

In this chapter, I addressed some of the main challenges former combatants face as they return from captivity. I have argued that return as a decision and action depends on subjective and objective opportunities as much as on the combatants' commitment to risk trying to escape. The hardest part in returning, though, is not escape itself, but readjusting to the realities and mastering the challenges of civilian life upon their return. In comparison to the war-affected communities they return to, former combatants understand that they face some genuine challenges, such as community judgement and feelings of legal insecurity. But they also share a number of challenges with the other community members – in particular, a lack of resources to provide for their and their children's future by paying school fees or buying a plot of land, and in finding gainful employment. In their lives outside the bush, they are not only challenged to survive under these difficult conditions, but to make sense of their time in captivity as part of their greater life stories. The narratives they come up with are a means to reclaim their lives upon return, but they do not necessarily help them to move beyond their past. In any case, their abduction experiences and the effects of war on their livelihoods continue to shape their present and the hopes they have for their future.



### Summary

In this thesis, I have tried to provide some insights into the puzzle of armed action in the LRA, one of the longest standing non-state armed groups worldwide. I set out my research to answer two questions (Chapter 1): How do combatants cope with the violent demands of the organisation, and how does the organisation manage to enforce their violent demands? To do so, I first introduced the theoretical concepts and contributions that my analysis is based on.

To find answers to my research questions, I decided to conduct semi-structured interviews with former combatants living in northern Uganda. These interviews were preceded and accompanied by talks given by experts in the field. Though interviewing former combatants and analysing their accounts comes with a number of methodological and ethical challenges, I argue that we can only gain insight into the dynamics and processes involved in violent action through the participants themselves: i.e., through their stories of what it means to become, and to be, a member of the LRA (Chapter 2). This approach entails putting questions of truth and falsehood aside in order to focus on combatants' narrative resources for making sense of their experiences of leading violent lives, and their strategies for understanding themselves as perpetrators, victims and witnesses of violence.

Against the common assumption that the LRA are 'rebels without a cause' led by a solitary mad man, I provided some background to the LRA's insurgency (Chapter 3), which can be traced back to Uganda's colonial history. Though ethnic or tribal structures weren't a foreign invention, British colonial administrative and hegemonic organisation politicised ethnicities on a national stage. Since then, power has always been a matter of securing access to resources to represent the interests of one ethnic group while excluding others from political participation. Since independence, every transfer of power has been enforced by violent means. Museveni's takeover in 1986 and his tight grip on power up to today have ultimately brought some stability to the political landscape, but they

have also given rise to armed insurgencies that contested the marginalisation of northern Uganda in national politics. While the LRA has left Ugandan territory and is not likely to return anytime soon, the root causes for its insurgency still remain unaddressed. This diagnosis provides a short and necessarily simplified explanation for the continuous presence of the LRA on the macro level. In the following, I situated the armed group within the dynamics and processes on the meso and micro level of the armed insurgency.

Part of the puzzle of the LRA's existence and extraordinary resilience has to do with the fact that most of its combatants have been forcibly recruited as children and adolescents. But how does the LRA manage to command a personnel that is primarily made up of under-aged and involuntary combatants? In the literature, two important elements have been emphasised (Chapter 1): (1) the use of extraordinary violence against both insiders and outsiders that compels combatants to comply in order to survive, and (2) the effects of socialisation to violence that ultimately turns involuntary combatants into committed fighters. These arguments are part of the answer, and their impact is visible throughout this thesis. But my analysis shows that there is more to it. Organisations have other, and it seems more powerful means of committing combatants to it, and combatants have more agency in this process than is generally suggested. Though (the credible threat of) force and an identification with the organisation's goals or one's role in it are crucial factors, they tell us only part of the story. Becoming a committed insider within armed groups such as the LRA depends on a complex interplay of organisational incentives and individual efforts.

For most combatants, the experience of living with war and violence preceded their involvement as combatants in the LRA. War shaped people's living arrangements, especially in the camps, and the organisation of their everyday lives. It was most visible in the precautions they took to prevent their abduction, and the rumours about and the experiences they had in encounters with the LRA and its enemies. Still, becoming a member of the LRA was narrated as an experience that broke quite radically with their routine(s) of everyday life. Abduction was regularly followed by walks that often lasted several days, and that created not only spatial but cognitive distance from their lives as civilians. At the time of their abduction, the interviewees didn't see themselves as full members of the LRA, but rather as captives. Their transition from abductee to soldier was performed through a number of often violent status passages (Chapter 4.1), in which new combatants had to prove themselves as worthy of *becoming* members, with

all the responsibilities and privileges that entailed. Their partial and incremental integration forced new combatants to commit to the organisation through compliant and affirmative action. At the same time, it allowed them to move from a position of powerlessness to one of, albeit severely restrained, possibilities to navigate their fate. Getting a gun and receiving a rank were the most visible signs of this transition from recruit to soldier. These status insignia not only provided combatants with means to protect themselves and access some privileges that improved their chances of survival, but also allowed and encouraged them to build a new identity as soldiers.

But not only did the LRA provide material and non-material incentives for the combatants to become compliant and even engaged members. Both the organisation and the combatants themselves created some kind of normalcy and routine that allowed the abductees to get used to and even come to enjoy life in the bush (Chapter 4.2). Routinisation was about the normalisation not only, and not even primarily, of violence, but of everyday life in the bush. The routines and institutions that came to structure combatants' day-to-day activities both drew on and challenged traditional ways of living among the Acholi. Waging war itself was only one and, for many, a minor aspect of life in the bush. That doesn't mean, though, that war was absent. Its presence was continuously felt, but more the realities of constant movement; the lack or uncertainty of getting enough food, water, or sleep; and tight control over every aspect of people's lives. Combatants found support and temporary relief under these dire realities as they built friendships; enjoyed themselves by sharing jokes, singing, and dancing; or found solace in religious beliefs. The efforts to make the bush a 'home away from home' allowed them to deal with, get used to, and even come to enjoy aspects of life in captivity. Many former combatants addressed themselves and their colleagues as *mabuc*, i.e. captives or prisoners. Indeed, the comparison to prison life goes beyond terminology. Both prison and bush life, with their rules, relationships, routines, and their claim to totality, create spaces that can become comforting, safe, and manageable, just like – or in contrast to – civilian life.

As a total institution, the LRA closely monitored the combatants' every movement. Every transgression carried the risk of severe punishment, which in turn guaranteed a high level of compliance with orders and rules. Still, combatants were not without agency, and its exercise was central for the combatants' immersion in the group (Chapter 4.3). Their agency was visible in acts of both hidden resistance and active compliance, and everything in between. On one

hand, combatants carefully explored their options to evade orders, and weighed their chances of getting away with non-compliant behaviour against the risks associated with being caught. On the other hand, compliance with orders was not always a defensive move motivated by fear of punishment. Just as often, combatants actively decided to comply with orders or even to exceed organisational demands in order to improve their living situation, their chances of survival, or their opportunities for eventual escape. That is, combatants exercised agency both as they surpassed and as they undercut their superiors' expectations. From an organisational point of view, both dynamics were functional; and have been, if not actively encouraged, knowingly tolerated. By giving combatants some space to navigate their fate, the LRA facilitated their identification with it. The irony here is that the organisation drew its members closer to it where they tried to loosen its grip; that the combatants deepened their own commitment when they intended to achieve just the opposite.

Combatants positioned themselves and exercised agency not only through their actions, but just as much through their narratives, the stories they tell themselves and us about themselves (Chapter 4.4). These narratives help combatants to make sense of their identity and their actions, both in captivity and upon their return to civilian life. There is an inherent conflict between their claims to decency, their need to see themselves and be seen as good persons, and the violent actions they were expected to perform. Combatants tried to solve this conflict by means of their narratives. They made identity claims that posited them as essentially good persons under duress, and in comparison to other, unnecessarily and 'authentically violent' comrades. But they also made efforts to neutralise the reprehensible quality of their actions. They did so in particular by employing narrative techniques that aimed at 'undoing' the one-sidedness of violence against civilians. By invoking role identities as soldiers and spouses, they were able to reframe violent and transgressive action as necessary, legitimate, or even heroic. Combatants found their place in the LRA by negotiating their experiences and actions through their narratives.

These challenges were shared by all combatants, but experiences, opportunities and restrictions were clearly gendered. Against the popular portrayal of female combatants as mere auxiliary forces – domestic servants and spoils of war – the analysis shows that female combatants fulfilled a number of essential roles on and off the battlefield (Chapter 4.5). In both realms, they made active moves to navigate their fate, and engaged with often conflicting role expectations. At

the same time, their presence and the institutionalised roles they played were crucial for the creation of normalcy, in which norms and rules of gender relations in Acholi society were both confirmed and challenged. Their double role as fighters and support staff on one side and wives and mothers on the other was addressed as a challenge. But it also became an opportunity to remove themselves from the battlefield, both literally and narratively. That is, while women had to deal with conflicting role expectations, they commanded a number of genuine resources to exercise agency.

Together, these dynamics created a kind of commitment that compensated for the missing identification with the organisation's goals or tasks, and that ultimately freed the LRA from having to win the members' approval of their means and ends. In the thesis, I made a strong case for looking at combatants' practical immersion in the group and their organisation of everyday life to understand how they became committed insiders, rather than focusing on ideological aspects of identification with the group. That does not mean, however, that the LRA and its members were apolitical, or that they didn't think they have reasonable cause to fight. Most combatants had, and continue to have, a conflicted relationship with the LRA: while they see their abduction as a violation, they attribute some legitimacy to the armed group's fight (Chapter 4.6). On a basic level, these legitimacy beliefs were grounded in the realities and everyday life of domination, or 'basic legitimacies' (von Trotha 1994b). But they were just as much based on perceptions of just cause, and the spiritual authority and charismatic leadership of Joseph Kony in particular to fight past and present violations. These legitimacy beliefs were not adamant, but were clearly challenged by adverse actions of the LRA: internal power struggles, lacking goal orientation, and violence against colleagues, but most importantly, violence against civilians. While these delegitimising factors were not on par with more practical aspects of combatants' engagement with the LRA, they clearly impacted how decisions were made about staying in or leaving the bush.

Decision making processes involved in return were complex, and drew their momentum from "a mixture of opportunity and willingness" (Annan et al. 2006: 62) on part of the combatants. Opportunities were as much about objective possibilities to escape the organisation's close supervision as they were about the combatants' subjective perceptions of not just escaping successfully, but returning home safely. Their willingness to attempt escape hinged on their assessment of the risks involved and possible gains in leaving the bush. Return was not an

isolated event, but a process that stretched well into people's lives upon return (Chapter 4.7). Up to today, former combatants' narratives are informed by a number of practical requirements to manage their everyday lives that are both a legacy and an often painful reminder of their lives in the bush. At the same time, they are challenged to make sense of themselves and their life stories as combatants who returned from the bush, and became, or are trying to become, civilians again. The answers they find influence how they see and approach their lives today, and what scope of action they see as being available to them.

In sum, forced combatants, though severely restricted in their actions, commanded a number of resources – narrative, institutional, organisational – to learn to live with violence in their everyday lives. In their efforts to make the exceptional, extraordinary and atrocious realities of their lives habitable, and to create spaces of routine, comfort and even enjoyment, combatants showed 'a talent for life' (Des Pres 1976: 192): the capacity, even boldness, to move on in the face of adverse circumstances. They are able to do the unspeakable, the inhumane, precisely because they insisted on their humanity and made conscious efforts to preserve it in an inhumane place. Mentally, some of them survived these experiences just barely, and were unable to start over after they returned from captivity, becoming "outside prisoners" (Andrew, l. 1242), "suffocating in a bottle" (Jackson, l. 1117).

This thesis cautions against seeing the violence of armed groups as something so extraordinary that it becomes inaccessible, and thereby non-negotiable. The tendency to interpret armed conflict in Africa as an irrational web of tribal hostilities, spirit beliefs, violence-induced trauma and brutality impedes understanding. It obscures the fact that violence is always something humans do to each other, and that collective violence typically cannot be understood as the actions of people 'out of their right mind'. This is even more true where violence is not perpetrated by 'willing executioners' (Goldhagen 1997), but by (young) people who have been forcibly recruited into armed conflict. Looking at their use of violence also means looking at the conditions under which ordinary men and women come to act violently.

### **Research perspectives**

What do these research findings tell us about armed groups and collective action in civil wars more generally? In the introduction, I argued that this case

study may provide us with some new insights into a theory of commitment to and agency in collective violence. Here, I will try to give some credence to that promise, and show where I see perspectives for further research on armed groups and collective violence in civil war and beyond.

What becomes clear is that the emergence and continuous capacity of the LRA to act depends on a complex interplay of macro-, meso- and micro-level dynamics. While dynamics on the macro level – in particular, ethnic politics, but also the environment in which the LRA operates (Chapter 3) – are indeed crucial to understanding the armed group’s emergence and resilience, they leave important questions unanswered. How do young people become committed or at least compliant fighters even in the absence of prior motivations to fight? How do they learn to lead their lives as participants in war and violence, and may even come to chose “the lifestyle of havoc” (Charles, ll. 558)? To find answers to these questions, I took a closer look the micro- and meso-level dynamics of the LRA’s insurgency. I argue that this approach yields some new insights into the processes through which young people become engaged in organised violence and into the roles they come to play as members of armed groups.

Young people become committed fighters – or better: become committed to their roles as fighters and combatants more generally – as they come to play a role in violent organisations or groups. These violent role identities are as much provided by the violent organisation as they are active accomplishments of the combatants themselves. They are challenged to find and build an identity that is both morally decent and compatible with the violent actions they are expected to perform. In that regard, non-state armed groups are more similar to state armies than we are led to believe. At the same time, these identities are embedded in their everyday lives, which are, though clearly marked by war, more about routines than they are about rupture. The simple yet underrated truth is that humans cannot live, at least not for long, in states of permanent emergency. Institutions are key to their adaptation to leading violent lives. These institutions both pick up on and challenge ways of living at home. In this sense, they both try to establish the bush as a ‘home away from home’ while emphasising its genuine logic. These insights are a call to pay closer attention to the actions and everyday life of armed groups *off the battlefield*.

These processes of normalisation are, to a great extent, facilitated by institutions that provide combatants with orientation and a guide for proper and

expected action. In this sense, institutions serve the same purposes as elsewhere: they are practical devices to reduce complexity and facilitate decision-making processes. In the case of the LRA, they were more than that: they allowed for the smooth functioning of the organisation's business of waging war. What seems to be as important – or even more so – is the way in which institutions made living with war and violence (and not only the routine perpetration of violence itself) possible, and even comfortable. That doesn't mean that combatants were passive agents of violent action. In fact, they played an important part in creating these institutions and making them effective. At the same time, some of these institutions were important resources for the identity claims combatants made. They provided them with frames that allowed them to understand their violent actions as routine, necessary, or even heroic. Institutions not only supported combatants' socialisation to violence, but made this kind of life habitable, and allowed combatants to both belong to a social space and be recognised as persons. Thus, the question of which offers non-state armed groups have to make on the individual and group level might provide new impulses for understanding combatants' motivation to stay and commit even when initial motivations are non-existent, or become less important or even obsolete.

In sum, the interplay of institutions and identities in armed action provides powerful incentives for young peoples' commitment to and agency in armed action. Civil war research would profit from paying closer attention to it, not least because it provides important insights into what it takes to succeed in demobilising and reintegrating former combatants into their home communities, and to rebuild societies after mass violence.



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# Appendices



Name	Sex	Born	Prior Education	Age upon abd.	Age upon return	Year abd.	Year of return	Duration (years)	Mode of return	Countries of placement	Highest rank	Married in LRA	Children in LRA	Returned with
Andrew	m	1976	S1	18	29	1995	2006	11	escape	Uganda, Sudan	lieutenant	yes	1	colleague(s)
Bart	m	1980	P5	16	20	1996	2000	4	surrender	Uganda	-	no	0	alone
Ben	m	1971	P6	18	18	1999	1999	<1	escape	Uganda	-	no	0	alone
Charity	f	1980	P2	11	30	1991	2005	19	capture	Uganda, Sudan, Congo, CAR	lieutenant	yes	5	child(ren)
Charles	m	1982	P6	16	20	1998	2003	4	escape	Uganda, Sudan	sergeant	yes	0	alone
Claire	f	1990	P4	11	25	2001	2015	14	release	Uganda, Sudan, Congo, CAR	-	yes	3	co-wife(wives)
Deo	m	1971	P4	15	25	1986	1996	10	escape	Uganda	sergeant	no	0	colleague(s)
Elisabeth	f	1989	-	12	24	2002	2014	12	escape	Uganda, Sudan, Congo, CAR	2nd lieutenant	yes	3	co-wife(wives), child(ren)
Faith	f	1988	P3	8	15	1996	2004	8	escape	Uganda, Sudan	-	yes	1	colleague(s), child(ren)
Flavia	f	1981	P4	12	23	2003	2014	11	release	Uganda, Sudan, Congo, CAR	-	yes	2	colleague(s), child(ren)
Fred	m	1976	P6	17	23	1993	1999	6	escape	Uganda	-	yes	0	colleague(s)
Gabriel	m	1973	P6	24	26	1997	1999	2	escape	Uganda	-	yes	1	colleague(s)
Geoffrey	m	1979	P5	20	22	1999	2001	2	escape	Uganda	-	yes	1	alone
George	m	1960	P4	35	42	1996	2003	7	escape	Uganda	lieutenant	yes	2	alone
Harriet	f	1980	P3	12	22	1992	2002	10	release	Uganda, Sudan	sergeant	yes	2	colleague(s), child(ren)
Henry	m	1963	P5	23, 37	24, 40	1986, 2000	1987, 2003	1, 2	escape	Uganda, Sudan	2nd lieutenant	yes	1	spouse(s)
Herbert	m	1979	P5	19	19	1999	1999	<1	escape	Uganda	-	no	0	colleague(s)
Hope	f	1992	P4	10	20	2002	2012	9	escape	Uganda, Sudan, Congo, CAR	-	yes	3	spouse(s), colleague(s), child(ren)
Isaac	m	1970	P7	28	29	1999	1999	<1	escape	Uganda	-	yes	0	alone

Table 1 continued from previous page

Name	Sex	Born	Prior Edu- cation	Age upon abd.	Age upon return	Year abd.	Year of return	Dura- tion (years)	Mode of return	Countries of placement	Highest rank	Married in LRA	Children in LRA	Returned with
Ivy	f	1988	P4	11	15	1999	2003	4	release	Uganda, Sudan	-	yes	1	colleague(s), child(ren)
Jackson	m	1977	P7	18	33	1995	2010	15	escape	Uganda, Sudan, CAR	captain	yes	4	colleague(s)
James	m	1979	P6	24	24	2003	2003	<1	surrender	Uganda, Sudan	-	no	0	colleague(s)
Janet	f	1979	P6	14	21	1993	2000	7	escape	Uganda, Sudan	-	yes	1	colleague(s), child(ren)
Joan	f	1981	P2	11	20	1992	2000	8	capture	Uganda, Sudan	-	yes	2	child(ren)
Joel	m	1985	P5	9	25	1994	2010	16	capture	Uganda, Sudan, Congo	2nd lieutenant	yes	2	alone
John	m	1977	P5	20	27	1997	2004	8	escape	Uganda	captain	yes	0	colleague(s)
Joseph	m	1979	P5	15	26	1995	2006	11	escape	Uganda, Sudan	captain	yes	1	colleague(s)
Josephine	f	1974	P3	16	31	1990	2005	15	capture	Uganda, Sudan	lieutenant	yes	4	co-wife(wives), child(ren)
Joshua	m	1983	P4	13	29	1996	2012	16	escape	Uganda, Sudan, Congo	sergeant	yes	0	alone
Joyce	f	1980	P5	15	31	1995	2011	16	escape	Uganda, Sudan, Congo	-	yes	6	spouse(s), child(ren)
Mercy	f	1984	P7	16	26	2000	2010	10	escape	Uganda, Sudan, Congo	-	yes	2	colleague(s), child(ren)
Michelle	f	1987	P6	16	19	2003	2005	3	capture	Uganda	-	yes	1	alone
Moses	m	1972	S4	24	24	1996	1996	<1	escape	Uganda, Congo	-	no	0	colleague(s)
Nathan	m	1988	P1	7	10	1995	1998	4	escape	Uganda, Sudan	-	no	0	colleague(s)
Noah	m	1972	P2	17	18	1989	1990	1	escape	Uganda	-	no	0	alone
Norah	f	1994	P4	8	20	2002	2014	12	release	Uganda, Sudan, CAR	-	yes	3	child(ren)
Patience	f	1982	P3	13	20	1995	2002	8	escape	Uganda, Sudan	-	yes	1	child(ren)

Table 1 continued from previous page

Name	Sex	Born	Prior Education	Age upon abd.	Age upon return	Year abd.	Year of return	Duration (years)	Mode of return	Countries of placement	Highest rank	Married in LRA	Children in LRA	Returned with
Prisca	f	1987	P4	10	23	1998	2010	13	escape	Uganda, Sudan, Congo	-	yes	2	colleague(s), child(ren)
Samuel	m	1955	P7	30	35	1986	1991	5	escape	Uganda	sergeant	no	0	alone
Sarah	f	1980	P2	11	22	1991, 1994	1993, 2002	1, 8	release	Uganda, Sudan	sergeant	yes	1	colleague(s), child(ren)
Scovia	f	1982	P5	11	23	1994	2004	11	escape	Uganda, Sudan	lance corporal	yes	3	child(ren)
Simon	m	1981	P3	15	23	1998	2000	2	escape	Uganda, Sudan	-	yes	2	colleague(s)
Solomon	m	1994	P1	9	13	2003	2007	3	capture	Uganda	-	no	0	colleague(s)

Table 1: The sample's characteristics

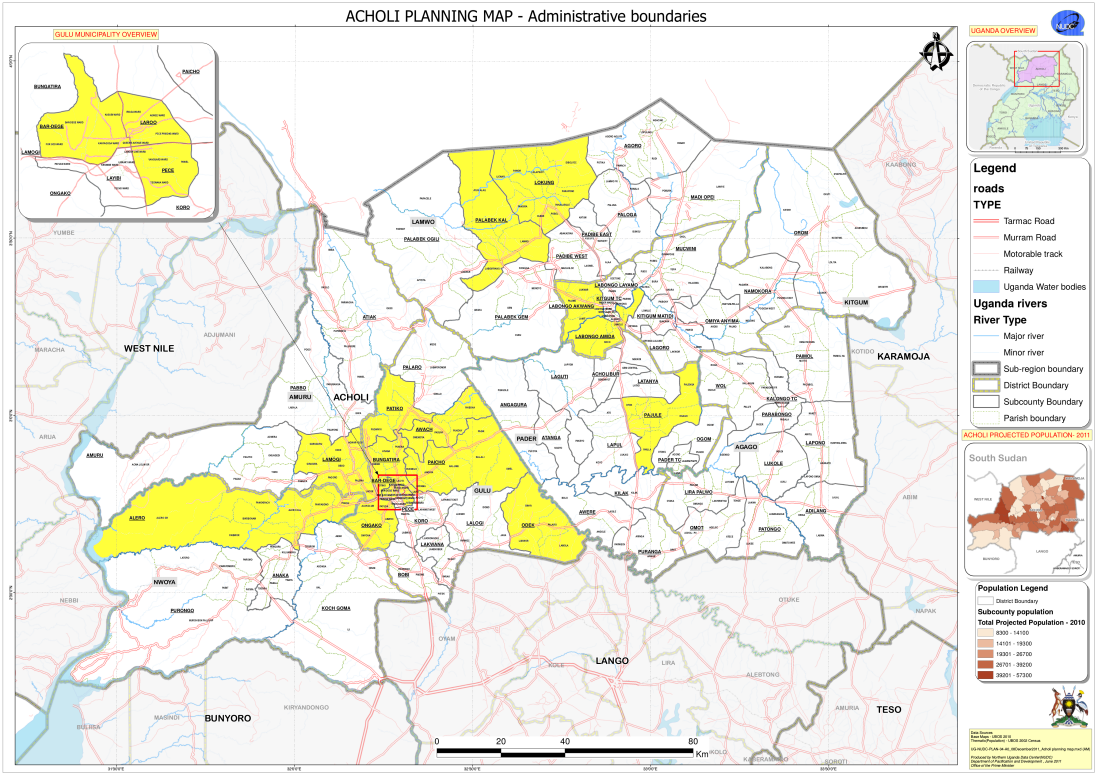


Figure 1: Interviewees' home sub-counties in the Acholi subregion (highlighted) (Map courtesy of the NUDC, highlights by the author)

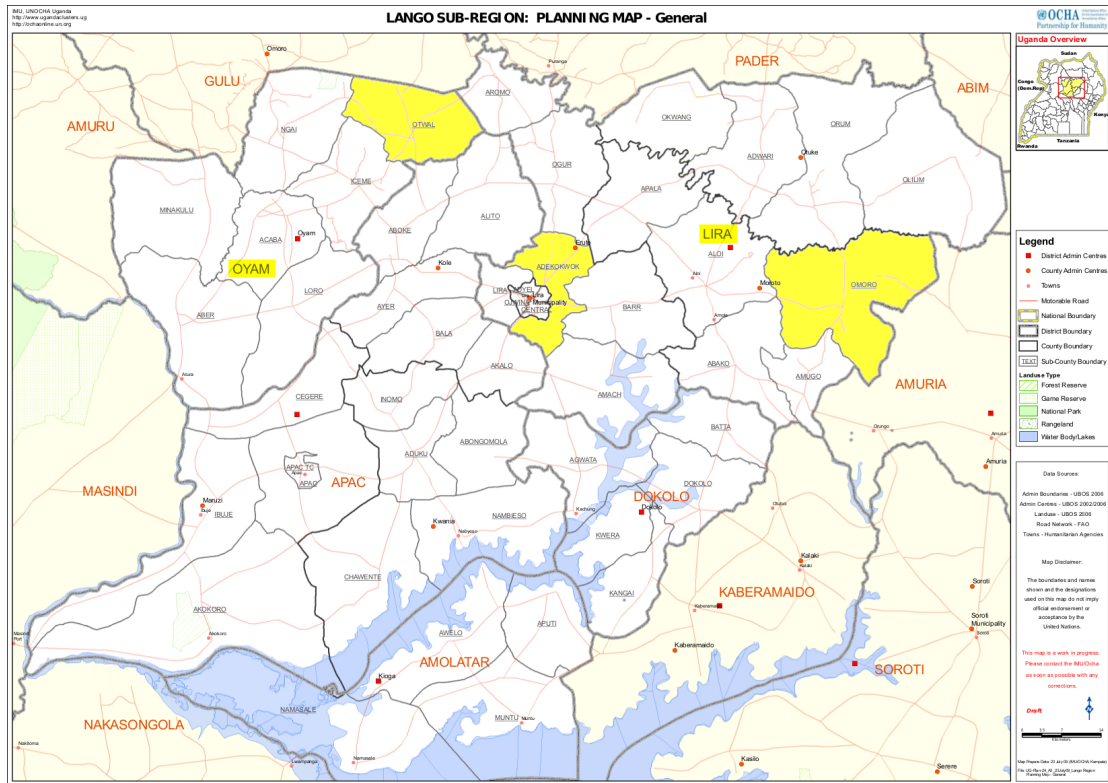


Figure 2: Interviewees' home sub-counties in the Lango subregion (highlighted) (Map from UNOCHA, highlights by the author)